



# A Guide to Communication and Stress

*Speak**Up***

*Speak**Out***

# How to improve communication when you are stressed?

When we are experiencing extreme stress our ability to communicate diminishes massively. We experience lack of clarity, confusion, brain fog and 'rabbit in the headlight' syndrome. All of which make it very difficult to communicate effectively during times of stress. Whether we need to express our emotional state or have difficult conversations, when we experience stress we find it difficult to articulate ourselves. Also many people are concerned about appearing weak or unable to cope, which becomes another barrier to asking for help when their mental/emotional state is compromised.

That is why this **International Stress Awareness Day**, we are encouraging people to **Speak Up and Speak Out**. Having the ability to get things off your chest, share your concerns and ask for help is the first step in effectively managing stressful situations. If you can find a way to calmly, clearly and honestly express your fears and concerns and when talking to someone that is stressed to be able to effectively listen empathetically – not to offer counselling or trying to fix them, just to understand where they are and what they are experiencing. People often just want to be heard and offload.

## How can stress impact the way you communicate?

- On average people under low levels of stress can process an average of 7 messages at a time. Under high levels of stress however people can only process 3 messages, meaning you are more likely to miss vital information.
- Ordinarily people recall information in linear order (eg 1, 2, and 3) but under high levels of stress people recall what was most important/last said.
- When stressed areas of higher brain function shut down, meaning that the parts of our brain responsible for problem solving, lateral thinking and creative thinking effectively are shut off.

## How to improve the way you communicate overall:

The most important thing here is to check-in with yourself before you start any form of conversation. You will want to make sure that you are calm and not tense or angry before starting to communicate with others. If you are starting a conversation angry, frustrated, emotional or distracted, you may not listen to what others are saying, or worse you are escalating the conversation from the start by making the other person feel defensive.

If you notice any of these symptoms before you start to communicate, then you may be too stressed to talk and should leave any conversation until these signs have stopped:

- Muscle tightness
- Rapid or shallow breathing
- Angry and frustrated
- Flushed face
- Stomach ache
- Clenched fist
- Difficulty concentrating



# How to communicate effectively when you are stressed?

When you decide to open up about stress, whether you have been bottling it up for a while, or have only been stressed for a few hours, it can sometimes be very hard to communicate your thoughts and feelings clearly.

**Here are some tips on you can improve your communication when you are stressed.**

1. Focus on your breathing – slow deep breaths will help to bring any nerves or anger under control.
2. Try to relax your muscles particularly your shoulders and your jaw.
3. Remove any distractions from your immediate vicinity such as computers, TVs, phones etc. This will enable you to concentrate better on what is being said and on body language.
4. Prepare for the conversation by writing a list. This way you will be sure that everything you want to discuss is covered and that you won't lose your train of thought as the conversation progresses. It also means that everything should be covered in one conversation, so all parties can move on.
5. In a conversation the best piece of advice is advice is when you are not speaking don't just be planning what you are going to say next, actively listen to what is being said and respond when appropriate.
6. Use 'I' statements rather than 'You' statements. If someone has upset you, don't start with 'You upset me...' it is better to approach it with 'I feel upset because...'
7. See things from the other side. Make an honest effort to understand the other person's perspective. Even if you don't agree with it, life is all about compromises and sometimes a little bit of
8. Negotiate a compromise. Sometimes in order to reduce stress for everyone you'll have to reach a compromise. Compromising shows that you've been listening, that you care, and that you're invested enough to work with the other person to find a solution that you both can live with. It doesn't necessarily have to be forever either, so you can always re-evaluate after a period of time.
9. Understand it may take more than one conversation to resolve your stresses.
10. If the conversation feels like it is not heading in a positive direction than suggest resuming the conversation on another occasion. It is best to put some time and distance between the situation and wait for things to calm down.



# What to do if a conversation gets too stressful!

We have all experienced a scenario when you are trying to resolve an issue and the conversation gets heated and spirals out of control. If you are the type of person that avoids confrontation you may find you shut down in this situation. If you get angry and reactive this will only aggravate things and cause a major escalation to the situation.

Whichever way you react, one thing is for sure – neither are a healthy way to resolve things. It will take one party to step out of this dynamic if the conversation is to reach any resolution or compromise.

## Here are some tips on how you can help bring the conversation back on to an even footing:

- **Watch your proximity** – Don't stand too near or too far away. It is really important to also not lean in as this type of body language can be seen as aggressive, and being too far away can appear aloof.
- **Try not to gesticulate** – limit the movements with your hands. Too much hand movement can be seen as threatening and particularly if it results in pointing. The best body language to use is actually called 'mirroring'. This is where you mirror the other person, as it generates a reaction in the brain that senses social bonding and so it reduces the level of conflict.
- **Maintain your gaze** – Try to keep your gaze steady and relaxed. If your eyes are shifting and darting this can make the other person feel nervous.
- **Tone and tempo are everything** – Try to keep your tone calm, steady and sincere. If you can feel this changing in yourself take some long deep breaths before you respond or talk. Another useful technique is to allow pauses. Space gives you time to readjust your tone and think about the best way to respond.
- **Be clear and concise** - Be specific about what you need or about what the problem is. Do not get off track and bring up more than one point at a time, or you'll confuse the other person.
- **Stick to the fact only** – It is easy to get drawn into conjecture and opinions, stay focused on what has happened, what you feel and how best to resolve things. Also avoid hearsay.
- **Deal with the here and now** – keep all references to any past disagreements or issues in the past. What you are trying to deal with right now is more than enough and when you start bringing up the past, the point of the conversation can be lost and you can leave with a feeling like nothing has been resolved.



# How to communicate with someone that is stressed?

Speaking up about being stressed is very important, as is asking for help when you are compromised. It is also very important to be available to listen and support someone who reaches out for help when they are stressed. How you respond to the request for support is crucial and will determine how comfortable they feel opening up and how willing they are to be vulnerable with you.

## So what are the best things you can do if someone reaches out to you for support?

- **Listen**

Listening is a vital skill, and it is also may not come naturally so it may help to develop your abilities. It is important that whilst you are listening you do not do anything else, give the person your undivided attention. Provide your visual attention by maintaining eye contact, and hold space for them to open up. Whilst you are listening do your best to maintain neutral, open body language.

- **Be empathetic**

Showing empathy towards someone that is experiencing stress simply means seeing it from their perspective. You don't have to agree with everything they say or feel, just do your best to put yourself in their position to understand them better.

- **Make a referral**

Don't feel like you have to have all the answers. Sometimes the best thing you can do is direct the person to counselling services, The Stress Management Society or their GP. Encourage them to call and make an appointment right then and there. Even better yet offer to accompany them when they go for their appointment.

- **Follow up**

Let the person know that you'll be checking back with them to see how they are getting on.





For more information about how we can help you contact us on:

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*We look forward to supporting your wellbeing journey.*



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