

How To Be A Burden

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Free Sample Chapter
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CONVERSATION IS JAZZ

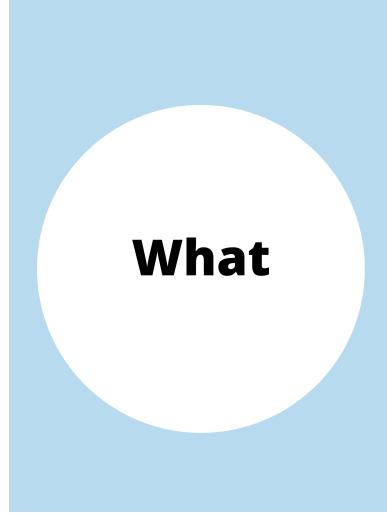
Honest conversations are a beautiful mess. A mixture of seriousness and absurdity. They're unpredictable. One person might accidentally speak over the other or there may be awkward pauses, but when both sides can figure out how to respond to each other, it's harmonious. It isn't inherently easy to make conversation into a smooth melodic sound. If either person is one step ahead or one step behind then you're not having a dialogue. You're responding to echoes or expectations of what was said (If you've ever been in an argument then you know what this is like). Ideally, each comment should be tethered to the last words the other person spoke. There's a rhythm and cadence that emerges in every conversation and in this chapter you'll learn how to play with anyone, amateur or pro.

Notice that this chapter isn't titled conversation is music. Jazz is more spontaneous and erratic than other genres of music. Jazz jam sessions require focus without expectation to give each instrument the ability to influence the others. The essence of jazz shares the exact same hallmark as productive communication, being open to different possibilities. Anchoring your conversation to the ideas you started with would be akin to entering a jam session and thinking to yourself that you're only going to play from three notes. Without knowing what the other person is going to play you limit yourself if you start off with a closed mind.

It is impossible to calculate the exact order of words that will come out of someone's mouth so you should pay careful attention. There are thousands of words, some with multiple definitions, and each one can be used with different tones. All of those combinations lead to millions of subtly different meanings. You must be willing to hear what is presented to you and be careful not to get stuck on what you predict you will hear.

I'm starting here because you can't master the high level work of curative conversations if you don't understand the basics. Conversation is going to be our tool to combat depression so you have to learn your instrument. This chapter will cover four aspects of conversations:

- What you say
- How you say it
- Why you're talking
- When and Where you're talking



What You Say

Before you learn about the melody, you must learn the notes. When you have a typical conversation you probably just say whatever comes to mind. You might not pay much attention to whether you asked an open-ended or closed-ended question. You might not analyze whether your response was a validation or a challenge, but these differences matter. For most people, the uncertainty of what's to come in conversation is what causes dread, panic, or paralysis. “What am I going to say!?” Stay calm. First you have to know what you *can* say. By understanding your options, you can feel more comfortable choosing from the limitless buffet of verbal options.

Overthinking what you’re going to say is where the danger starts so let’s start with something sweet and simple. When you’re starting to change how you speak, keep it short. Assuming that you have to explain ideas or objections at length is where people get tripped up. “What am I going to say?” indicates fear about long drawn out explanations that might be unnecessary. More often than not, simple answers indicate everything you need to say. If not, you can elaborate. Practice using these statements, by themselves, and see what response you get.

- **Yes** - This can be especially hard for people who are depressed to say. It means accepting invitations, welcoming new opportunities, or taking a strong stance. But it is essential to have in your vocabulary as it gives a clear and uncomplicated acknowledgement. It can be better than yeah and it’s definitely better than sure. It gives an unambiguous affirmative. Do you want to go to this party? “Yes.” Do you like the way this looks on me? “Yes.”
- **No** - This can be especially hard for people who are depressed to say, if you’re on the other end of the depressed spectrum. Some depressed people overextend themselves because they’re afraid of others judging them negatively. Saying no is a succinct way to create a boundary between you and other people. Boundaries aren’t a bad thing, they can be more like a gate than a wall. It’s your best tool to avoid burnout and stress. You don’t necessarily have to give a reason after you say no either. Keep it short and

simple. Can you work on this report for me? I don't have time today. "No." Do you want to come to a Zoom holiday party? "No." Further clarification and explanations can be appropriate but practice saying no by itself first. Let the other person follow up with a response before you give a reason. You might be wasting your breath or mental energy preparing your justifications. Just because someone asks you to do something doesn't mean you have to say yes. And just because you ask someone else to do something doesn't mean they have to say yes, even if you rarely ask them for things. Get comfortable hearing and saying no with practice.

- **Thank you** - Saying thank you is often implied, especially in longer relationships. Whether it's with people you've just met or someone you've known for a long time, saying thank you more will make people feel appreciated and respected. Sometimes, people who are depressed say thank you too much because they assume they aren't deserving of decent treatment, but other times people don't say it enough because they assume they don't impact people's lives enough for the thank you to matter. See how people respond when you say thank you to tell which is more accurate to you. Important sidebar - thank you is all you have to say when someone pays you a compliment. On the flip side, when someone says thank you, all you have to say is you're welcome, if anything.
- **I don't know** - This is the most underrated phrase to add to your vocabulary. When you're worried about how the conversation will play out or what will happen if you don't know what to say, all you have to say is that you don't know. At work "I don't know, I'll find out the answer." At home "I don't know what time I'm going to finish that." To yourself "I don't know why I did that." In a new place "I don't know where to go." If you don't know a word that someone uses, ask what it means. Speaking this phrase more often is humbling. People will appreciate your honesty and then they can explain more if they need to. We've all seen someone who clearly doesn't know what they're doing or where they're going try to fake it. There's no need to be that person.
- **I'm sorry** - Saying you're sorry can be excruciatingly difficult. It seems simple. It's just two words. But people sometimes think of it as giving up in an argument. I wish English had more words than sorry. Instead, sorry is used as a catch-all for so many meanings: feeling sorry that someone is in pain from something outside of their control, feeling sorry that someone caused themselves pain, apologizing for something you did that hurt, or polite interruption. You can clarify what kind of sorry you mean if the other person doesn't understand but it has to be said. You've probably picked up on the pattern that depression can lead you to overuse or underuse certain words. If you overuse "I'm sorry" you can practice clarifying what kind of sorry you're indicating so people get a better

picture of what you're trying to say. Try "I'm sorry that happened" or "Sorry, can I interrupt real quick?"

- **I was wrong/I made a mistake** - Practicing this phrase is a great replacement for I'm sorry when you were the cause of a problem. The easier it is for this phrase to come out of your mouth the easier it will be for you to adopt a growth mindset. Unfortunately, people who are depressed can stop at acknowledging the mistake and then assume the worst about themselves. The real important piece comes after you admit a mistake and ask for feedback about how to do it better. It's the 1-2 punch of growth. Admit your mistakes so you can understand them and work on them. Denial of mistakes, big or small, is like throwing a blanket over the dirty part of a room. You won't fix what you're choosing to ignore.
- **Tell me more** - This is a therapist tip. When you think someone is talking about a situation, problem, or person that they think is important, this phrase will enhance the conversation. Inviting someone to tell you more shows curiosity and people will feel encouraged to share more with you. People often question if the listener is interested in what they're saying so this phrase quiets that low grade background fear. If someone mentions something more than once it's probably important to them. That's when you ask for more.
- **I disagree** - Being explicit about disagreements is essential to good relationships. You aren't disagreeing with the person as a whole, just their idea. But when disagreement isn't spelled out explicitly it can be misread as disrespect. For example, "I think it's important for us to talk to our daughter about our divorce now." "What? Why would you think that?" It is more productive to say "I disagree" because it keeps the conversation about ideas. "I disagree. I think we should talk to her about it after we get back from our trip" would elicit a more productive response than the first example. Stating that you disagree minimizes potential misunderstandings. In the heat of the moment anything can be misunderstood so be careful with your word choices.

Everyone could probably benefit from saying one of those statements more often. If you're too isolated you could say yes more often to invitations. If you're overwhelmed and stressed by all of your obligations, you might need to say no more. Worried that you're coming off as cocky or arrogant? Try saying I don't know at least once a week. It's a small ask with big repercussions. Remember that improvising conversations with people is about experimentation. What does the listener say in response to you? Listen very carefully to their reply and choose a response to their response. That's where conversation becomes transformative.

My guess would be that at least one of those statements makes you uncomfortable to say. That's the statement you start with first.

Now that I've introduced you to some easier techniques for conversations you can delve deeper into more complex concepts.

Below are some of the categories therapists use to classify communication:

- Statements
 - Self disclosure
 - I statements
- Questions
- Paraphrasing
- Validating
- Challenging
- Non-verbal cues

Each of these are useful in the right context and they can overlap.

Statements - They state or assert an idea that you are offering the listener. They can be further broken down into facts or opinions. E.g. “This is the tallest building in Chicago” or “They don’t have enough food at this party.” These can be long drawn out stories about what happened in a situation or two word sentences. “I’m tired.” There are several ways to categorize statements but there are two types that are more powerful than others, for the intents and purposes of this book.

Self disclosing statements - These are statements that indicate or imply something about you. E.g. “I hate that slurping sound straws make.” Or on a more serious note “My mom just found out she has a tumor in her stomach.” You might not notice when someone does this but you’ve definitely noticed when someone doesn’t do this. If you’ve ever had a conversation with someone who barely said anything about themselves even if you talked for 20 minutes you might not feel like you actually connected. It can leave you feeling dissatisfied. Of course it depends on the kind of interaction and your relationship, but in general self disclosure is a great way to connect with people. “I really like wearing these kinds of hats” is going to elicit a better response than “These are nice hats.”

I statements - are another subcategory of self disclosure in which the first word of the statement is I. Compare “I was scared when I saw you drinking that much” to “You scare me when you drink alcohol.” By starting with I, the listener is tuned into the idea that whatever comes next is based on your perspective and is not an objective fact.

Questions - Questions add depth or breadth to a conversation. They can be divided into open or closed ended questions. Open ended questions have a variety of possible responses. E.g. “Where do you want to eat?” Closed ended questions require either a yes or no response. E.g. “Have you been here before?” People can follow up a yes or no with more information but an open ended question improves the chance you’ll get a longer response. Questions can be used to dig deeper into a topic of conversation. E.g. “You said your dad grew up in Mexico? Did he ever tell you stories about what it was like?” Or they pivot into something completely different if you want to change the topic. E.g. “I know we’ve been talking about our top five rappers but have you ever thought about...?”

Paraphrasing - Putting what someone said into your own language, typically condensing their statements into fewer words. It shows that you are actively listening to the person and trying to understand what they’re saying. Eg. “I’m just too stressed to even think about starting a relationship right now.” “You don’t want to start a relationship when you feel overwhelmed.”

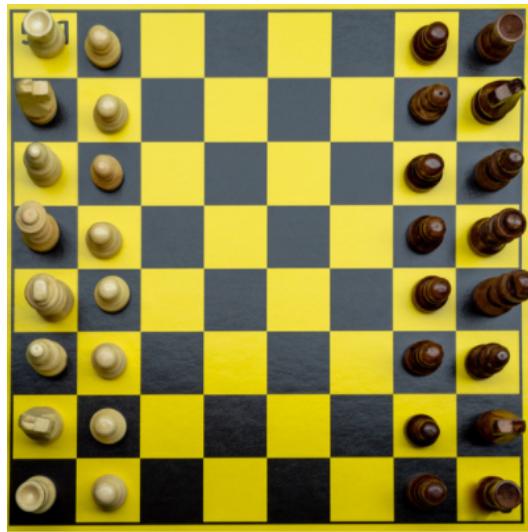
E.g. “I told her that if she’s going to treat me like that she can find somewhere else to live.” “You don’t want to live with someone who disrespects you!” Notice, this is not repeating what the other person said. That doesn’t necessarily show you’re listening, it just shows you can be a parrot. But be wary, using cliches in an attempt to paraphrase can make you sound like you aren’t actively listening. E.g. “Yeah, you win some, lose some.” “It is what it is.” Aim to be more specific.

Validating - Acknowledging what emotion a person is feeling and giving that feeling a stamp of approval. Note, this does not mean you agree with them or that you condone an action like, punching someone because they made you mad, but you recognize that it’s reasonable to experience anger in that situation. Pretend that you’re a camp counselor. One of the kids runs up to you and screams, “Someone stole my favorite pen!” What you don’t want to say is “It’s just a stupid pen, don’t be so upset about it.” Because you’re saying that the internal experience he is having is not the correct experience. What if at the doctor’s office when he tested your knee reflex and your knee pops up he said ‘Huh, well that’s stupid. Mature people’s knees don’t do that.’” You have no control of emotional reflexes. You do have control over how you respond to those reflexes but that takes time to develop. As that counselor, you could validate that kid by saying “I know you’re upset about your favorite pen. It must have been really important to you.” After either the validating or invalidating response you could follow it up with “I have no way to figure out who took it though.” But guess which of the two responses leaves the kid feeling better and which one leaves him feeling worse? A more sobering example: You listen to your cousin talk about how worried he is about his alcoholic parents’ constant fighting and you see him start to tear up. You could validate him by saying “It’s okay to be sad about your parents, I’d be sad too.” If you don’t think you’d feel the same way in a situation you don’t have to say it but you can still provide emotional support by understanding their emotional reaction. I’ll use spicy food as a final example. Imagine you were born and raised on spicy foods in India. Then you go to a friend’s house and the spiciest thing she ever eats is banana peppers. You cook her some vindaloo and she says it’s incredibly spicy! But to you it’s milder than sweet and sour sauce. You can validate that she thinks it’s spicy without agreeing that it’s spicy to you or would be spicy to you because there’s no denying her mouth is on fire.

Challenging - Actively disputing the specifics or general idea a person is stating. Doing this too much is an easy way to ruin a conversation but sometimes it’s necessary. E.g. Someone says they are always treated unfairly at work but you’ve worked with them for ten years and you’ve seen how they work...So you respond, “Well, you do show up late half the time so it makes sense that you get the worst shift.” Challenging can help someone change how they see a situation. It is an absolutely critical part of good communication. You might have heard the expression “If two people agree about everything then you don’t need one of them.” But just because something is good for you doesn’t mean it’s good no matter what. Water puts out a typical fire but makes a grease fire much worse, so you have to be careful with challenges. Challenges are best if they come after validating, paraphrasing, and/or questions. Like the climax in a movie, there has to be some investment first. If you don’t care about the characters yet you don’t care that Darth Vader is Luke’s father. The person can’t hear your challenge as being credible if they don’t believe you’re on their side first. If you tell me a five minute story about how someone is trashing your reputation and ruining your life and the first thing I say is “Well,

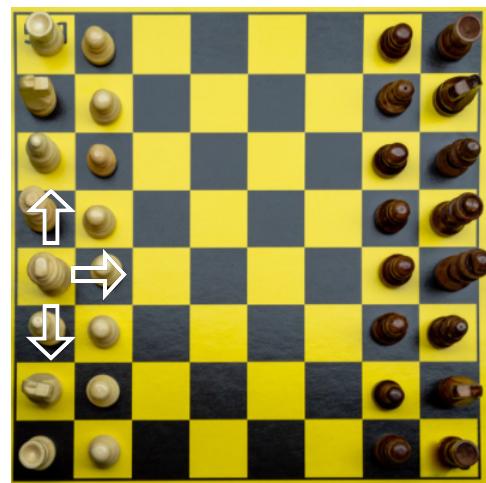
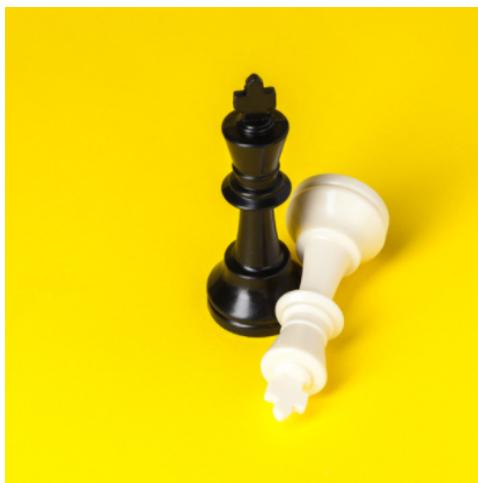
they do have a point.” Even if I’m right, the chances are low that you are actually going to take in what I’m saying.

Non-verbal cues - Anything you can do that communicates something that isn’t a spoken word. This includes facial expressions, hand gestures, sounds like smacking your lips or mmhmm, and physical proximity. Each of these adds nuance to verbal communication. E.g. a challenging statement like “You don’t really have to go to work do you?” feels different if your wife is caressing your back right next to you compared to her standing five feet away with a finger pointing at you and a scowl on her face. Often overlooked, nonverbal cues are a major component in how you communicate with others and how they perceive your comments.

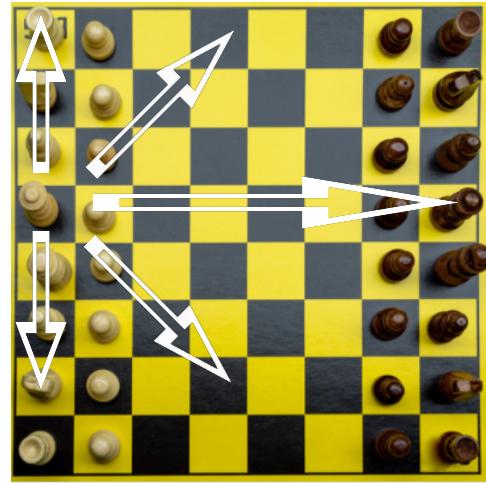
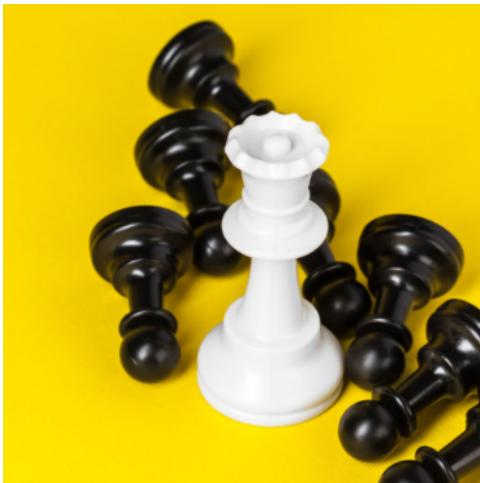


When I think of the innumerable ways a conversation can play out it reminds me of chess. Except there isn’t a winner and a loser. If a conversation goes well then both people win. This comparison may help you remember the roles of each communication category. For those of you who don’t know how to play chess...it will help a little anyway.

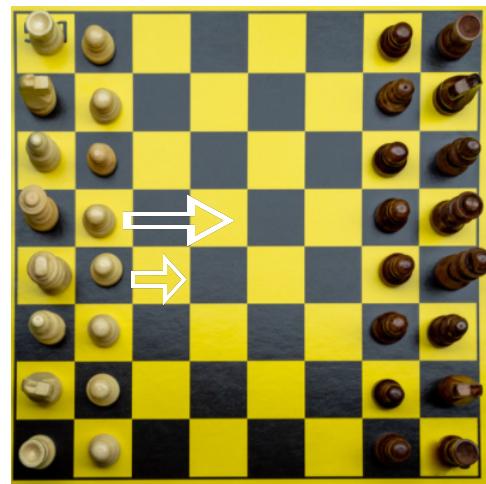
King - Statements - The king can move any direction but only 1 square at a time. It is the most important piece in the game. If you lose your king, you lose the game. . Likewise, you can’t have a conversation without statements. Whether you’re making an observation or sharing your perspective, statements can move the conversation in any direction but not by too much. It all depends on what the other person does in response to your statement.



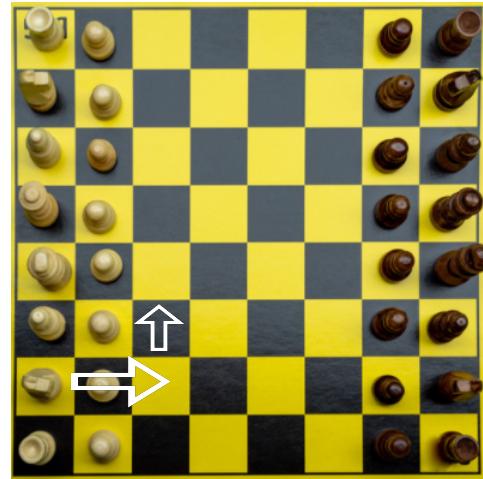
Queen - Questions - The queen can move any direction, any number of spaces. The most powerful piece in the game. Questions can do anything. You can have a conversation with anyone by asking questions because they can move the dialogue anywhere. Questions can shift the focus to the other person or yourself, they can shift the focus to the future, past or present. They're basically unstoppable.



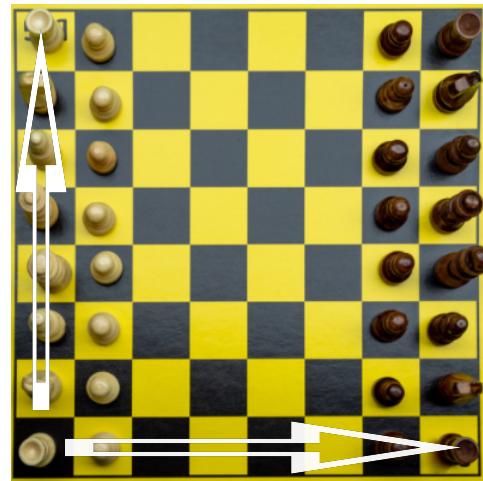
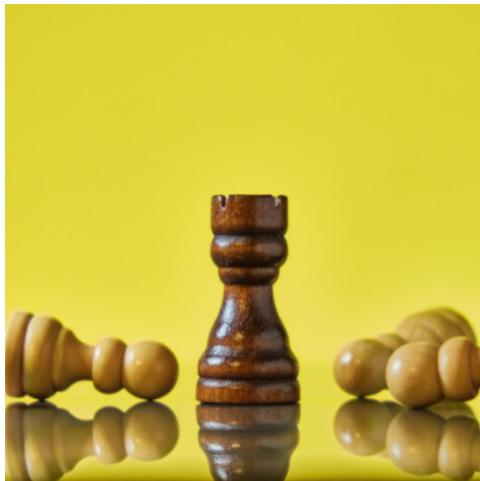
Pawns - Paraphrasing - Pawns can only move one or two spaces at a time and they can never go backwards. Paraphrasing doesn't move the conversation along by much, just a bit at a time. E.g. "It feels like everything that can go wrong today is happening." "You're having a rough day." But if you paraphrase well and often you'll find yourself in a very fluid conversation. A paraphrase can transform into a question and change the game. Just like if you get a pawn all the way down the chess board you can transform it to any other piece. "You've been talking to me this whole time about how much you hate your dad, but then you keep saying he's one of the most important people in your life. Are you deeply confused about what your relationship with him is supposed to be?"



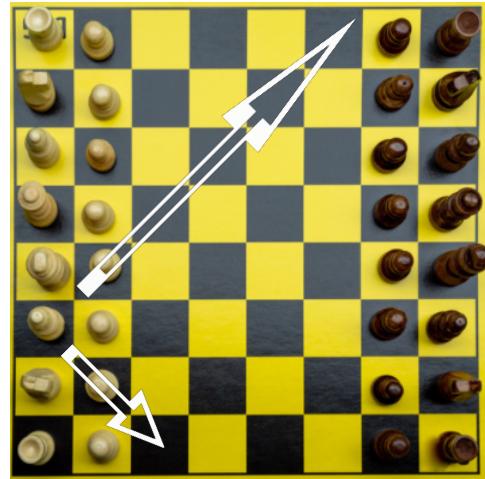
Knights - Non-verbal cues - The knight moves in an L shape, two spaces up and one over in any direction. Knights can hop over, bypass, or negate any of the other pieces. Non-verbal cues can do the same. “You’re too silly sometimes” accompanied by a big smile and a wink means something completely different compared to that statement by itself.



Rooks (Castles) - Challenging - Rooks can move any number of squares on the board vertically or horizontally. They're a great offense and a great defense. Challenges can help people see a topic in a completely different light. Equally, you can challenge someone's challenge and reinforce your perspective. By themselves they intrinsically cannot deviate from their lane. A challenge has to rebut an idea and does not introduce too many other variables the way a question can.



Bishops - Validating - Bishops can move diagonally across the board any number of spaces but they have to stay on their color square. Validating can move a conversation smoothly but only on a narrow track. Only validating someone's perspective inherently means that you aren't challenging them. You're reflecting their feelings back to them and acknowledging them which automatically keeps your feelings or disagreements out of the conversation until you shift gears.



It's time for a quiz to solidify these ideas in your mind. Write in this book. Make permanent marks. Remember that admitting you don't know something to someone else or yourself is humbling and marks areas for growth. I encourage it. Get used to becoming okay with being wrong. Write in pen in this book.

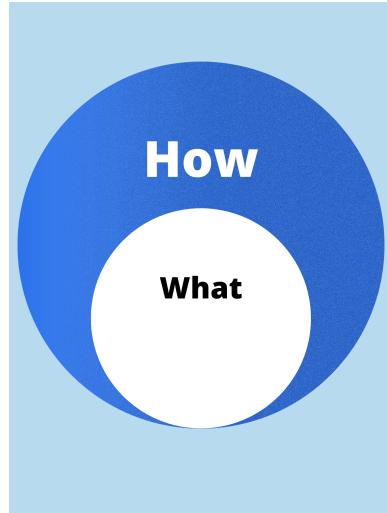
Match each selection with the most appropriate type of communication.

1. "I'm working too much."
 - a. Paraphrase
 - b. Statement
 - c. Validation
 - d. Challenging

2. Neighbor 1: "Take the L train, it's the fastest way to get there."
 Neighbor 2: "You haven't been there before. I know it's faster to drive."
 - a. Paraphrase
 - b. Statement
 - c. Validation
 - d. Challenging

3. Teenage girl: "I'm stressed. I made a schedule. I was going to my mom's, then to the store, then back to my house. But my dad just called and now I have to go to the store first and won't get to my mom's until five o'clock!"
 Teenage boy: "Your day is not going how you planned."
 - a. Paraphrase
 - b. Statement

- c. Validation
 - d. Challenging
4. Son: *While looking down and starting to cry* “I got a D on my last paper.”
Father: “It’s okay to be sad about it.”
- a. Paraphrase
 - b. Statement
 - c. Validation
 - d. Challenging
5. Student 1: “I just failed my driving test again! I’m so stupid!”
Student 2: “No, you’re not! You’re one of the smartest people I know.”
- a. Paraphrase
 - b. Statement
 - c. Validation
 - d. Challenging



How You Say It

People focus way too much attention on what they're going to say in conversations. I know that may seem counter to everything I said earlier but the content is meaningless without tone. *What* you say is enveloped by *how* you say it. It's the box to the package. Is it gift wrapped or just a plain brown bag?

Consider all the extra markings in music that explain how the note is played. Those marks indicate how long the note is supposed to linger in the air, whether a sound is supposed to blend into the next note seamlessly or change abruptly, each difference must be specified because it makes for a completely different expression. Words are just as malleable.

Listen to any two people talking and you'll be able to tell something about their relationship from their tone. Try watching a new show or eavesdrop on a conversation and see how long it takes you to understand their relationship. Usually it's the *how* that tells you, not what they say. Even the most basic of exchanges can be illuminating. Imagine two people having the following conversation:

Person 1: Hi
 Person 2: Hi
 Person 1: How are you?
 Person 2: Good, how are you?

When the first speaker says hi, were they enthusiastic? Somber? Or annoyed? How long was the response? Hi can be elongated like "Hiiiiii" or a very curt "hi." Perhaps you read the first "how are you?" used with an exasperated tone so you created a person who is asking out of polite obligation rather than genuine curiosity. You naturally imbue a tone to this conversation because reading this exchange without any would sound flat. Tone is so instinctive that you can't read that exchange without a tone. Try it out. Even if you try to make it two robots talking to each other you create a built-in back story or relationship between them.

I can't decide if *what* you say is more important than *how* you say it but I can tell you that people need more practice with *how*. When I role play conversations with my clients we have to rehearse the *how* more than the *what*. The *what* is relatively easy to determine, the *how* is

difficult to execute. The *how* takes more practice and it's helpful to have someone else give us feedback about it. Just like you hear your voice differently in your head, your understanding of your tone isn't much better. It's hard to communicate tone in writing but I'll give it a shot.

"I don't know how to tell you, but I think I'm bisexual," can be said dozens of different ways.

"I...don'tknowtotellyou but....I thiiiiiiiiiiink I'm bisexual," is very different from

"I. Don't know how to tell you but, I think...I'm bisexual."

You've spoken about 6 million words a year since you were able to form full sentences (Mehl, 2007). According to Science Magazine, you developed a vocabulary between 25,000 and 40,000 words, depending on how you count words. Would you count ain't? Is loghead one word or do you count log, head, and loghead? Regardless, you've said a combination of at least 25,000 words arranged into a string of 6 million words each year for quite some time now. Naturally, you favor certain words over others so you use them more often. And you tend to say some words slowly while rushing through others. You emphasize the second syllable on certain words when others emphasize the first. This is how you have slowly created the tone that you use to speak today. Your tone is so obvious that it even comes through in text messages. You've created and mastered your tone. It's yours. It's how people recognize you. Because it is so individualized it makes it doubly hard to change it. Imagine if you were a virtuoso at classical violin. But the next performance required you to play honky tonk country. You can do it but it wouldn't be as smooth or intuitive as your typical performances.

That unnatural uncomfortable feeling is why I rehearse conversations with clients. To assess how good you are at this skill, try saying this phrase with each tone:

- "This is a new t-shirt" - with a pretentious tone like the other person shouldn't even have brought up the topic of conversation
- "This is a new t-shirt" - with an excited tone, like you're trying to sell someone on it
- "This is a new t-shirt" - with a flirty tone, like you're trying to impress someone
- "This is a new t-shirt" - with a stern tone, to tell someone not to touch it

Notice what you changed when you changed tone. Did you put emphasis differently on one word each time? Did you say, "this is a *new* t-shirt" for pretentious and "this is a *NEW* t-shirt" for excited? Or maybe you change the speed of the entire statement to indicate your tone? Try to do it again but don't use the same strategies you used the last time. See if you can find another way to show a tonal change that's a little abnormal for you. For example, you could put the emphasis on the *t* in t-shirt to be pretentious instead of the new. Or put emphasis on the *this* if you're trying to flirt instead of new. If you're feeling extra brave, try these out in front of someone else and see if they can tell the tone you're going for. I imagine this is what actors do all day which is probably why they get us to feel how they feel on screen.

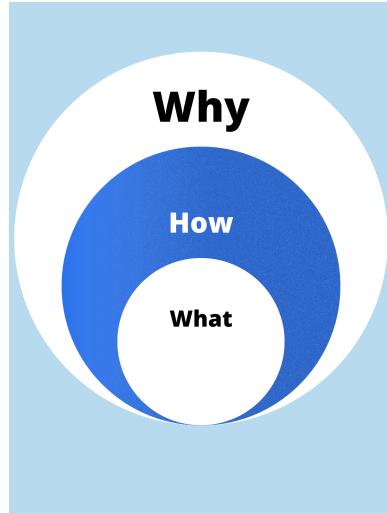
It is necessary to practice how you say something so that people actually hear what you're saying. If you hear a rap beat on classical piano it doesn't automatically sound good just because it's a good song. It has to be done well. Too often people assume that if they just figure out what to say people will understand them. I wish. Your serious tone might come out like

sarcasm when you try it out for the first time. Or your flirting might sound like you're being cruel. Get feedback first!

To add another layer of complexity to this, tone is not heard universally. Maybe you remember the series of visual illusions that went viral a few years ago. Is the dress blue and black or white and gold? There were people firmly in each camp but both were right, it just depended on how your brain interpreted that information. So you can talk to your friends about how something sounds that you said and you can both agree it sounded polite but that doesn't mean that's how your other friend heard it. The only person that can verify if your tone matches what you're intending is the person you're talking to at that moment.

When you're trying to open up about something serious, oftentimes the *what* does not carry enough weight. Unless it's an extreme circumstance like a death, illness, or physical injury, you're going to have to rely on your tone to communicate importance for you. "I had a really bad day" can mean "Stop everything you're doing! I need help! Please help!" or it can mean "A bunch of small things went wrong today and I'm annoyed."

I hope it's clear to you now how important tone is in your conversation. Although you've developed your own tone naturally, you can also shape it and play with it. It was built by repetition and can be reshaped by the same. Experiment and see what happens.



Why You're Talking

Allow me to introduce you to intention, also known as your *why*. Whether you know it or not, intention is your captain, your guide, your sherpa. It's the component of communication that leads the others into alignment. Asking yourself about your own intentions leads to self discovery.

Of the three, *how*, *what*, and *why*, *why* gets the least amount of attention when you think about yourself but it gets the most attention when you think about someone else. It's part of the reason people-watching is so entertaining. You imbue others with a set of intentions that makes their actions or conversations more interesting. But trying to read other people's intentions is not why you're reading this book. You're here to learn about expressing *your* intentions to others. This section focuses on how to communicate what you mean to say.

There are two approaches to mastering your own intentions, detecting or directing. The first is figuring out what your intentions are by carefully examining what you said and how you say it. How often are you asking yourself, "Why did I say that?" I hope you start to do it more often. And I don't mean that in the self-deprecating, "I'm so stupid, why did I say that?" way. I mean it as a reflective exercise where you actually answer the question. "I don't know why I said that. Why would I say she could stay as long as she needs?" Potential answer, "Maybe I'm actually feeling more afraid about leaving this relationship than I thought." In that example, you said, "As long as she *needs*" not "As long as she *wants*," and you were sure to emphasize the word *needs*. Why the distinction? What does that difference mean to you? Trace the line from your word choice to your intonation all the way to your intention. It can take some detective work, but it's worth learning your modus operandi.

The other way to use intention is like a North Star. It can be your guide in case you ever get lost in a conversation. Create a *why* before you engage in an important conversation and you'll see how it flows more smoothly. Prepping for a job interview you may say to yourself "The purpose of this conversation is for me to learn about this organization and for them to learn about me." Or it could be, "I'm trying to show them that I'm the best person for the job." Before telling your friend you want to move out of the apartment, it can be helpful for you to set an intention around: "I want her to know I'm serious about leaving but I also want to stay good

friends.” or “Let her know that I feel disrespected as a roommate so I’m leaving.” Keeping a statement in mind opens the floodgates to the downstream problem of “what should I say?”

If you find yourself uncertain of what to say next in a conversation, there is always a way out. You simply...state your intention and what you’re thinking with an I statement. Sounds simple but there’s no hitch. It works every time. Explaining your intent clears up confusion and allows the other person to understand you better. The I statement also invites the listener to express if they are thinking about this conversation the same way you are. So your *why* statement can double as a *what*.

Here are some options you can use if you find yourself in these situations.

- On a date during an awkward lull in the conversation - “I want to get to know you better but I’m not sure what to say next.”
- At an interview and you aren’t sure what you said made sense - “I want to let you know about how my past work experiences make me a good fit for this office, I hope that’s coming across.”
- In an argument after the other person made a good point but you don’t want to respond right away because you’ll probably keep yelling. You could say “I’m trying to calm myself down by being quiet for a little bit, I don’t want to fight anymore.”

Letting the listener know what your intentions are makes it more likely that you’ll be on the same page. If I describe this in a different way, it may feel more familiar to you.

Suppose you’re talking to a friend and they start to challenge what you’re saying. You feel a little confused. Then they disagree with your next comment too. You’re starting to get annoyed. They question if you even know what you’re talking about. Now you’re pissed off! Then they say “I’m just messin with you.” Ideally, you both laugh, feeling the tension release. Realizing that all those signals you were interpreting in a potentially negative way had a different intent changes the entire dynamic. Stating your intention - even if it’s not at the beginning of the conversation - gives the person a lens to review anything that’s happened up until that point in the conversation. It’s like a pause-and-reflect checkpoint.

Your intention statement gives you a chance to check in with the other person and switch tactics if you need to. Additionally, it gives you a couple seconds to gather yourself if you just want a moment to regroup.

To put this another way, when you aren’t sure what to say, just say what you’re doing. Narrate your thoughts. Use I statements only. “I’m trying to make a good impression but it’s harder than I thought,” not “You’re hard to talk to.” “I’m taking a long time to put on my shoes because I’m trying to look cool and talk to you at the same time.” Let the other person come to you by making your intentions clear. If they know what you’re trying to do they can feel safer. If they judge or react negatively to you stating your intention then you have real concrete information about what to do or say next, instead of guessing. You can apologize or change topics, but doing either prematurely could make things awkward.

It’s unsettling when you don’t know someone else’s intentions. You stay on high alert until it’s clearer. I know I feel most comfortable in a conversation when it’s all nicely laid out. Person A has a certain role and Person B has a different role. I like to know up-front who is the

leader. I feel uncomfortable when it's less clear who is in charge. Have you ever been in a group project where it's not clear who is running the show? It can get messy. Stating your intention allows everyone to come to the table on an even playing field.

So far, I've made it sound simple. Just say your intention. But oftentimes you don't know what your intention even is. As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, you want your *what*, *how*, and *why* to match.

If you don't know your *why* then trace back through what you've said, and how you've said it. You'll have the pieces necessary to put together what your intentions are. The knotty part is when you figure out the *what* and *how* you are left with multiple *whys*. For example, imagine you're a 12-year-old girl and you've been marching straight up to your room when you get home from school without saying hi to your parents for three days straight. On the rare occasion your parents decide to ask if you want to talk, you say, "Not now" in a soft meek tone. What are your intentions? Maybe you don't want to talk to them? Maybe you're trying to get their attention so they talk to you? You said "not now" instead of "no" so it seems you would be okay talking with them at some point in time, just not at this moment. What's going on right after school that makes it harder for you to talk? Maybe it has something to do with school or something that happens on the walk home? This kind of detective work is what self reflection is all about. It takes time and it isn't always obvious. Remember that if your intentions can elude you then they can definitely be misperceived by others.

Examining your intentions and spot checking them against your *what* and *how* is one of the most effective ways to improve your communication. Each of these three legs can serve as a counter balance if one gets out of hand. If you find yourself in an argument, yelling at the other person, your voice getting louder as the point of your initial argument is slipping farther away you can ask yourself if your intention is matching with your goal. Hopefully, your goal is wanting the other person to see your perspective or to calm the situation down. Does yelling at someone help with either of those? Most of the time that's a no. Force yourself to take a step back and ask, "What is the point of me saying this?" Angry yelling doesn't match with, "I want you to understand what I'm saying."

I want to take you one level deeper into the importance of intention. As a third party observer, it's pretty easy to accurately guess someone else's intentions. You see someone in a store look left then right and put something in their pocket. You don't think to yourself "Looks like he accidentally dropped that watch into his coat pocket." You know his intent was to steal. You're riding the bus and you see a man asking people for change. You watch him walk by someone who is intently focusing on reading her book when just a minute ago you saw her staring out the window. It doesn't take a genius to know she's trying to avoid an interaction with the person asking for money. But this can be much trickier to perceive when you're in the middle of the situation. I can't stress this enough.

Think back to a time when your intentions were misunderstood. Seriously. Take a moment to remember when you were trying to say something or show someone something but they completely misinterpreted you. It's okay, I'll wait...

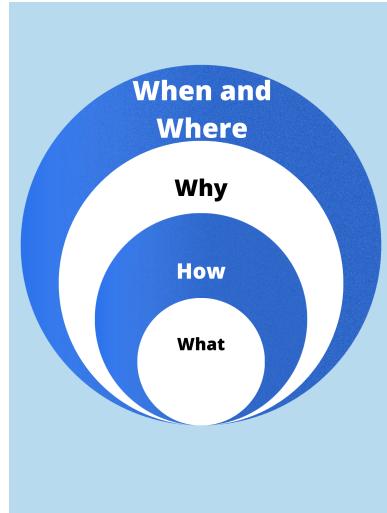
What happened? Maybe they thought you were making fun of them when you were being serious. Or someone thought you were bored when you were just tired. Or you were trying to show someone something new for fun but they felt pressured. It's all perfectly normal. It's human actually. These kinds of misunderstandings happen because our system for communication has plenty of flaws. All we have is language and non-verbal communication. Humans are good at communicating simple ideas but the complex ones are tortuously variable.

You can communicate urgent ideas to anyone from anywhere in the world. There is an international symbol for choking. Jumping up and down and waving your arms gets people's attention in Tibet and Tennessee. And if you collapse to the ground in tears, even a toddler knows something is wrong. Unfortunately, we can't transmit what's in our brains into someone else's mind. Although scientists are working on it, it's going to be a long time until technology can transfer a complex idea like, "I'm not in the mood to hang out right now but I definitely want to hang out some other time." Remember that misunderstandings in communication are inevitable. The more you practice stating your own intentions and examining your own intentions - the clearer and more effective your communication will be - and the more grace you will extend to others. You will start to remember that there are multiple possibilities when it comes to other peoples' intentions. It's easy to conveniently forget that.

Given the high probability of misunderstandings you can always ask about others' intentions to clear up any confusion. Exploring others' intentions is a pivoting point for conversations when you sense the conversation isn't clicking or there is tension building. I'm going to give you some example questions you can use to learn about people's motives. Quick reminder, these questions should only be used in a calm tone when you genuinely want to know the other person's intentions. These questions can sound like weapons if they aren't used gently. Try saying any variation of the following:

- "Why are you saying that? When I hear that I assume you're trying to make me feel _____"
- "How are you hoping I'd respond to that?"
- "What are you trying to say?"
- "Are you trying to calm down the situation?"
- "Are you trying to convince me to _____?"

Extracting intention from someone else is like mining for the gold directly instead of hoping to catch some while you sift through the river runoff. It may be more work but the payoff is better. You know there is some intention behind your partner's or friend's statements. If you can't figure it out, then ask.



When and Where You're Talking

I love a nice steak dinner, with silky mashed potatoes, and ideally some kind of fancy salad that has ingredients I can't pronounce, but that meal would be even better on vacation somewhere. It would still be good at home. It would be less enticing though, if I had to eat it at 5 a.m. And I don't know if I could enjoy it at all if it was my last meal on death row. The point being, setting matters. When you say something and where you say it plays a pivotal role into whether or not it's understood.

When

Let's talk about timing. Every conversation creates its own rhythm. This depends on how quickly each person speaks and how quickly they respond. If you miss a beat or mishear a phrase you can always find the rhythm and get back to where you left off or pivot and create a new rhythm altogether. Try not to stress too much about pauses, hesitations, or having to repeat things. In conversation, both people find a tempo together and those hiccups are an attempt to find that rhythm. The tempo that emerges, whether it's fast or slow, eventually smoothes the transitions and can transform something clunky into something profound.

Just like anything else, conversations have a beginning, middle, and end. Start conversations by speaking early. As soon as you see the person, and you're within speaking distance, say something. The most important thing about an opening line is that you use it. The longer you wait to speak when you're near someone the more pressure it puts on your opening line. Never underestimate the power of a "Hi" or "How you doin'?" as an opener. The rest of what you say can unfold gradually once it starts but overthinking how to begin a conversation might stop it from ever happening. You want to practice talking with people a lot so you can refine your style. Even if it's a two exchange conversation, it's still good to practice and will give you a chance to hone your tone.

Neighbor 1: "Hey!"

Neighbor 2: "Sorry, I'm late for work. Gotta run."

Starting a conversation can be difficult but people also get tripped up in the middle. If you stay relaxed and ready to listen to what the other person says you'll be fine. Nonetheless, I'll give you tips for the things people mess up on the most in the middle, silences and interruptions.

Silences

An essential component to any music is the silence that exists between the notes. Unfortunately, as you probably know, one thing that cuts a depressed person deep is silence. It's a void that you can fill with a million possible worries. It doesn't matter if it lasts for one second or ten, that space in between what you said and the lack of an immediate response feels as big as the Grand Canyon. Your mind floods with ideas like, "That was stupid to say!" or, "I probably just insulted them." That thought spiral moves quickly. I'm going to encourage you to reevaluate what those silences mean.

Envision a conversation with your wife in which you just finished talking about why you're stressed at work and want to spend some time alone tonight. She is silent. She could just be thinking about how to phrase her response carefully. She could be thinking about something entirely off-topic like what she wants to eat for dinner. She could be getting ready to unleash a barrage of insults. Or she could be spacing out.

Now, think about a great playlist with all of your favorite songs. In between each track there must be some silence. Even within a song a musician may make the last note linger to build up suspense for the next note, or she could be pausing to pivot the melody. Be conservative in your guess of what the silence means because to assume it's something bad about you every time will spoil the conversation. Do you assume every pause in a song is the end of a song or the beginning of a cacophonous change in the melody? Nope. You just sit back and let the silence come in and out.

You have to be conscious about what you do with silence. If you assume it always means "danger is coming" you might be bouncing all over the place in conversation. Consider silence as a checkpoint. Some conversations take on a life of their own and neither person is really leading it. Other times one person is clearly driving it. Silence can be the negotiation between who is the leader or if the conversation should even continue. So far I have mentioned five ways you can interpret silence, here is a more complete list:

1. An indication that the topic could change
2. The listener needs some time to give a thoughtful response
3. The listener was distracted or thinking of something else
4. The listener is trying to calm down
5. The listener is starting to get upset
6. Neither person is sure of what to say next
7. An indication the listener wants you to say more or change something about what you said
8. An indication that the previous statement was rude or inappropriate and the listener wants you to reflect on that
9. An indication the conversation is winding down
10. The listener has to use the bathroom (more common than you'd think)

Any of these options, or something not included on this list, may be going through the other person's mind when there is a momentary silence in conversation. It's important to realize that silence is not always a signal that something is wrong in the conversation. Long conversations need silences and pauses for each person to assess whether or not certain topics have come to an end.

Interruptions

Identically tricky, interruptions can cause just as much discomfort in conversations as silence. Where silence has many options for interpretation, I divide interruptions into just three: excitement, rudeness, or bad timing. Sometimes people interrupt you because they are just so excited about something they want to say they can't wait! Others are interrupting you because they think what they have to say is more important than whatever you are talking about. It's hard to read which one it is unless you know the person well. A more common reason for interruptions is that the listener assumed the speaker would be ending at a certain time and they guessed wrong. Now their comment cuts off the speaker instead of smoothly blending into the next conversation piece. You should keep in mind that an interruption can be any of the three. Be careful that you don't always assign the same meaning to someone else's interruptions. The reason for someone's interruption is also frequently misunderstood.

In high school, one of my best friends was notorious for cutting people off in conversation. Ninety percent of the time or more he would interrupt what you were saying and add his own thoughts or just change topics. He had a smooth and artful way of interrupting but it was interrupting nonetheless. Another close friend and I were hypothesizing why he did this and whether or not we should talk to him about it. We realized that he interrupts when the speaker runs out of steam and is speaking just to continue speaking rather than adding more to his point. Instead of talking to our friend about it we slowly started adjusting how we spoke around him and it made all of our conversations better. His interruptions actually helped us improve our communication to be more clear and concise.

Stanford researcher Dr. Katherine Hilton analyzed data from over 5000 respondents to better understand how people interpret interruptions. Her research found two distinct patterns in how people speak: high intensity speakers and low intensity speakers. High intensity speakers enjoy moments of overlap in conversation as they interpret interruptions to mean both people are engaged in the conversation. Low intensity speakers prefer to let each person take their turn while speaking and interpret interruptions as rude.

To make matters even more complicated, there are gender and cultural biases in how people interpret interruptions. Be cautious when you interpret others' patterns in conversation. You have to know their baseline before you can accurately assess why they're interrupting.

Ending

Unlike songs, you should avoid ending conversations with a fade out. Both people feel better when there is a clear ending to the conversation. What matters most is that you're communicating finality, whether that's through your words or through your tone. That could mean choosing words that indicate that the conversation is over like "bye" or "see ya," or you can build up to the ending by letting the listener know it's coming. For example, I'm going to end this section in just a little bit. Enjoy the next section.

Where

As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, *where* you're speaking is everything that surrounds the conversation, including physical space and the type of relationship. You wouldn't try to have a serious conversation on a rollercoaster. And you wouldn't describe a 3 a.m. night out to your best friend the same way you'd tell the story to your mom or your boss. *Where* you are plays a significant factor in what you say and how you phrase it. If you say, "What are you thinking?" to someone at a restaurant it means something very different than when you say, "What are you thinking?" at home in the middle of an argument. The words are shaped by the *where*. The context shapes how the listener will hear your words.

Words without context can be interpreted in too many ways. See if you can guess the context of these conversations without a premise:

Person 1: "American?"

Person 2: "No, go one more."

Person 1: "I heard it was trash"

Person 2: "Nah, it's fire!"

The first is a driver asking which airport terminal to pull up to. The second is two friends talking about a new song. The driver example demonstrates how words cannot easily be interpreted universally. There are so many words that sound the same but mean different things that we can't guess without some way to narrow our focus. The song example shows how the context of a relationship often includes slang, parlance, or jargon, words that are used only within a certain subculture. Words mean different things when people within a group use it compared to across groups. Another example, calling someone articulate for one group means something positive but connotes racism for another.

Unfortunately, the nature of a relationship can make it really difficult for someone to hear your words the way you hope they will. Imagine how hard it would be to prove to someone that you're innocent if they already think you're guilty. You can start to see how the nature of the relationship already changes how productive a conversation can be. When a conversation doesn't go how you expect, ask yourself if the relationship is making it harder for you to be heard or understood. For example, most children will have a hard time convincing their parents to change because inherent in the parent role is the assumption that they know more than the child (at least for a couple years).

All hope is not lost, though. Ironically, if you name the nature of the relationship it can help the person hear your words differently. The relationship is usually a natural background that people forget about like white noise. If you point out, "Do you hear that white noise?" it forces you to attune to something you previously ignored. E.g. "I know I'm the newest person on the team but I have some ideas." or "I know I'm your neighbor and not your mom but I'm starting to get worried about you." Emphasizing the relationship demonstrates that you're already thinking about *what* you're going to say from the listener's perspective.

Before you offer your advice or make your plea, draw attention to the relationship. When the person retells the story they are more likely to include the relationship in the story. "Someone told me I should pay more attention in school," feels different than, "My mom told me I should pay more attention in school." Naming a source gives it more credibility, especially if the source

is reliable. If I tell you a stat right now, would it sound better if I didn't mention the source at all or if I said it came from some world famous organization?

We're getting close to the finish line so I want to bring it all together by sharing how I prepare for conversations. Before I start a day of meeting with clients, I do two things. First, I usually rap or sing some of my favorite songs. At the time of this writing, my favorites are Kenny Mason's verse in Cereal and Leslie Odom Jr.'s part in Dear Theodosia from Hamilton. It's a way to loosen up and see how my instrument is tuned that day. If I want to say a word, can I recall that word and say it easily? It's a fun way to practice *what* and *how*. Secondly, drawing upon Carl Rogers' work I remind myself to be congruent (how I feel internally matches how I express myself externally), empathetic (caring and seeking to understand the other person's feelings), and lastly to give the other person unconditional positive regard (always giving them the benefit of the doubt that their words and actions have a positive intent). That's it. I make sure my mouth can make the sounds I want it to and set my intentions before talking with clients. Then those hours and hours of conversation unfold however they unfold. This is my approach. Feel free to create your own way to prep before conversations to make them as free flowing and eccentric as jazz.