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It Will Work for Those Who Work at It: Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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When my little angel was born, her first cry to kick-start lungs was unending. The obstetrician was suctioning her mouth and nose to clear away any mucus, and she was continuously crying. The nurse then cleaned her and she cried louder. Finally, the doctor covered her in a blanket, placed her close to my arms and she immediately stopped crying. I wondered if it was the first sense of security that she developed in this familiar touch when in the fetus, which made her stop crying. I realised that the communication between me and my daughter had started long back. In her growing years, it was amazing to experience how this skin-to-skin contact further built trust between us. Every nurturing touch strengthened her physical and cognitive abilities and her overall well-being. Later, it became the foundation of building a strong attachment between us.



Relief panel of two figures engaged in an offering ceremony (Courtesy metmuseum.org)

For millions of years, our early ancestors have been navigating this world by communicating their needs, emotions, fears, and desires through nonverbal communication, especially via the sense of touch. Human beings enjoy touch; it is the gateway to emotional proximity. When we are stressed, upset, or unwell – touch or haptic communication helps. It produces oxytocin which slows down the release of stress hormones and boosts the immune system of our body. According to the economist turned cultural theorist, Paul Zak, it is also a hormone that facilitates trust (2008, NP). But in the wake of the recent crisis, we are suddenly deprived of this sense of closeness. The invisible presence of a virus has permeated a sense of danger and has forced us to be unnaturally apart when we need it the most. Our lives have become tough both personally as well as professionally. From a personal

standpoint, we are confining ourselves in our homes, avoiding crowded spaces, and reducing our physical interaction with the external world to almost zero. Professionally, most of us are working from home. In this scenario, “social distancing” has become a new normal.

Evidence suggests that epidemics and pandemics have shaped human behaviours in the past and they are going to shape them in the coming years also. According to Edward Hall, we all have spatial needs which can make us feel comfortable or uncomfortable depending on various situations (1963). With a pandemic, and certainly where health is an issue, there is yet another distance, and that is the prophylactic distance or prophylactic zone which we have to maintain for our safety. Even as lockdown eases, social distancing will remain to be the new normal before a vaccine or effective treatment is found. Hence, it seems that the coronavirus isn't just threatening our health, it might equally be intimidating for our relationships. Being social creatures, our desire to be physically near others is natural but it is an even more overwhelming reality that social distancing can prevent the spread of the disease and save our lives. So, though it may be unwanted, it is important to maintain desirable social distance, communicate virtually and wear masks. Having said that, now the question is, what can we do to survive communication challenges which may occur while following these new norms during a pandemic?

Albert Mehrabian's (1972) non-verbal communications research says that only 7 percent of what people “hear” is the spoken word: 38 percent of what people take away from an interaction comes from tone of voice, and 55 percent comes from body language and facial expressions. Positive non-verbal communication has been shown to decrease human anxiety and give comfort. It gives the other person confidence to consider you a sensitive and understanding human being. It makes us more trustworthy and communicative. So what is the take away from these insights? Well, it simply suggests that there are many complementing non-verbal gestures that may help us bridge unexpected communication gaps arising due to the pandemic. One such example is replacing the handshake or a hug with “Namaste”, the Indian way of greeting people with folded hands from a distance. Be it US President Donald Trump or the French President Emmanuel Macron or British Royalty Prince Charles, “Namaste” these days is the preferred way of greeting.

Our eyes are formidable communicators of feelings, including assurance, love, comfort, anger, innocence, etc. Often, what is not spoken out loud is expressed exquisitely in the eyes. It is a powerful non-verbal communication tool to develop trust, goodwill, and empathy but with our face covered with the mask, sending and receiving the cues is a struggle. Similarly, smiles are contagious. During these difficult times ensure to smile in the first few minutes of interaction to convey your happiness. But with the mask on the face, how will we ensure that the cues we wanted to send are conveyed successfully? In this situation, certain new practices can be adopted, like instead of the white space (sclera) in our eyes, we should now more often observe the crow's feet wrinkles formed next to our eyes.

Learning to tilt and nod head during conversations again are positive non-verbal gestures which may help people understand that you are listening. Studies show that people who nod during conversation are rated 30% more likeable and 40% more approachable than the ones who do not nod (Allwood & Cerrato, 2003). Remember, it's often less about what you say and more about how you listen. Active listening goes a long way.

We, humans, are incredible learners and I strongly believe that we will learn the strategies to survive social distancing. Knowing one's personality type and the awareness of our social needs can also help one pass this challenge successfully. By understanding personality, one can begin to learn more about how they can process social distancing, as well as what they can do to help others. Some common strategies that may fit all personality types are communicating with clear, direct messages, avoid muddling your point with unnecessary information or too many details, engaging in constructive discussions, listening patiently, probing with open-ended dialogues and making frequent video calls.

Human behaviour has a powerful role to play during the pandemic. The more expressive someone is, the greater is the degree of his/her emotional contagion. Stephen Covey once wrote, “Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival- to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.” (2012). These days my colleagues, friends, and relatives constantly share that they feel overworked, under-appreciated, neglected, and lonely. While there’s no remedy for these current ills, regularly practicing gratitude can help. As rightly said by someone, gratification does not always come from physical or monetary gifts or incentives, it can definitely come from the language of appreciation. Research indicates that we are happier when we are grateful. But feeling grateful is one thing and expressing gratefulness is another. During the pandemic, practice praising each other on their achievements frequently. Use appreciative communication as a strategy to foster a daily dose of paying gratitude. This will spark dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is released in the amygdala to generate hormones that take care of our mental health.

As the number of patients from the ongoing pandemic continues to rise, it is difficult to find reasons to be happy. However, life is not all gloomy. Amongst many side effects coronavirus has brought, some of them are positive too. Researchers Sara Konrath and Delphine Grynberg (2016) found that the common sufferings bring people together, help them understand each other’s pain, and make them compassionate. While people across the world are experiencing same pain, they are in a position to empathise. This helps them become compassionate and kind, causing a chemical change in the brain that has a powerful positive effect not just on their social bonding but also on their immune system. The key chemical at play is again oxytocin. Hence we should more often show people around us that we care, tell we miss them, write thank-you notes, and do charity whenever possible. Similarly, we should also look for alternative options to cope with the isolation and the desire to be close to the people. Professor Tiffany Field, at the University of Miami, advocates physical exercises like walking, yoga, and stretching to combat isolation and ease the yearning (Field, et al., 1995).

They say that hugs boost our happiness levels. Basically, a good hug is the fastest way for us to get oxytocin flowing in your body. It calms our nervous system and boosts positive emotions. A good hug resulting in oxytocin flow lowers our blood pressure which is especially helpful if we are feeling anxious; it lowers our cortisol (the stress hormone), facilitating a higher quality of sleep, and increases our social connections and a sense of belonging. The coronavirus pandemic has stolen this luxury of comforting each other at the most profoundly human level. The richness and depth of human interactions are replaced with the communication that happens through technology. Though the virtual connection is never going to make up for real touch, it’s the best thing we have right now and as said something is better than nothing we should learn to adapt it with open arms. Sending positive virtual smiles and hugs to some extent may evoke a sense of proximity and positivity.

Lastly, I end the article by sharing a positive insight from Dr. Vivek H. Murthy (2017), an American physician who sees the virus as an occasion for a meaningful change. According to him, it is an opportunity to spend enough time with genuine people, real friends, family members, and even pets. This may help us combat the feeling of loneliness by giving us an oxytocin boost. Personally, the pandemic has taught me to enjoy my own company. My day starts with Yoga and meditation. I devote time watching TED talks, reading research articles, conducting webinars, teaching online, and watching my favourite classical Hindi movies on Netflix, Hotstar & Amazon Prime.

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