Practicing Compassionate Communication with Your Partner

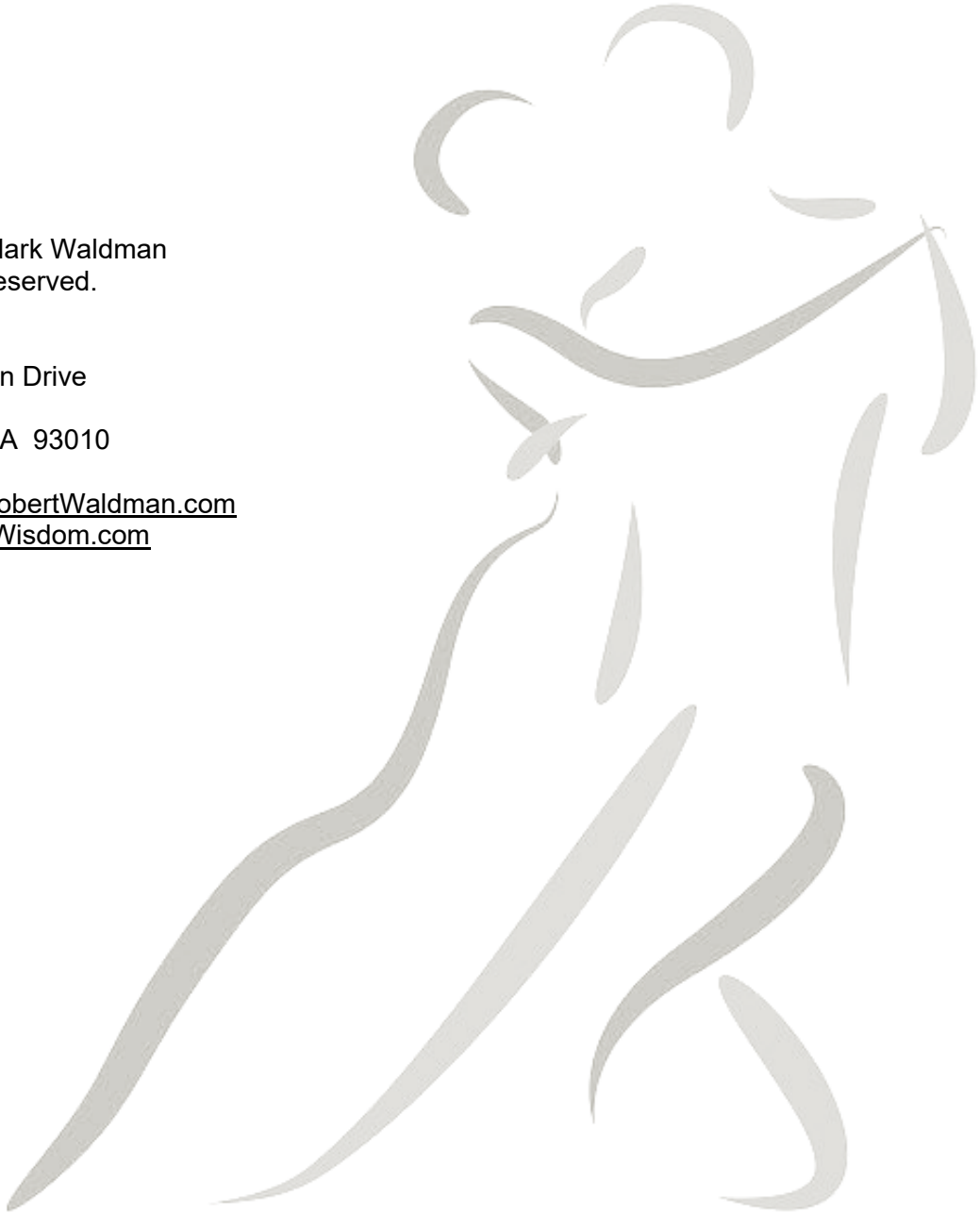
How to Speak Mindfully, Listen Deeply, Build Trust and Create Intimacy with Anyone



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The Meandering Conversation

Although we are born with the gift of language, we are surprisingly unskilled when it comes to communicating with others. We often choose our words without thought, oblivious of the emotional effects they can have on others. We talk more than we need to. We listen poorly, without realizing it, and we often fail to pay attention to the subtle meanings conveyed by facial expressions, body gestures, and the tone and cadence of our voice—elements of communication that are often more important than the words we actually say.

To address these problems I, along with a group of transpersonal psychologists and therapists, developed an experiential exercise where two people sit down facing each other as they both enter into a state of "Relaxed Mindful Awareness" and then allowing an intuitive spontaneous conversation emerge, deliberately speaking slowly and briefly and then listening deeply as the other person spoke. It is a form of dialog meditation and it quickly interrupts habitual ways of conversing that poorly convey what we mean and desire.

The premise was simple: if we train ourselves to stay relaxed and remain in the present moment, we might be able to communicate our feelings and desires with more compassion, less anger, and greater sensitivity and trust. A more intimate conversation can be established that can become more relevant and meaningful for everyone.

But you have to speak much more slowly than you are used to, using 20 words or less, and then pausing to allow the listener to respond – slowly, with 20 words or

less – as you continue to maintain a state of Relaxed Mindful Awareness. After the other person has spoken, you take a few more seconds to savor their words and to then respond only to what the other person just said. In essence, both of you are meditating on each other's words as you pay attention to their facial expressions and tone of voice. A spontaneous conversation emerges that is both intimate and conflict-free, one that allows both people to share vulnerable feelings and thoughts.

When done within a therapeutic environment, which was the original purpose for this exercise, relationship problems could be easily addressed when the therapist kept both people relaxed and anchored to their deepest relationship values. And when corporate team leaders bring variations of this Compassionate Communication strategy into the workplace, there is far more cooperation and kindness. I created this eBook so that you can guide yourself and your partner – or a friend or colleague, or even a child – through the twelve strategies of Compassionate Communication. It takes about 20 minutes to go through these steps, and if you practice this exercise several times, with different people, you'll begin to see how it can transform an ordinary conversation into a remarkable event.

You'll learn how to speak more clearly and you'll earn the other person's trust which is especially important when your emotions have been triggered. If you apply these 12 strategies in group situations, social anxiety disappears:

Before engaging in an important conversation:

1. Mindfully Relax
2. Observe Your Inner Speech
3. Focus on a Deep Relationship Value
4. Access a Pleasant Memory

While engaging in an important conversation:

5. Speak Slowly
6. Speak Warmly
7. Speak Briefly
8. Listen without Judgment
9. Pay Attention to Facial Expressions
10. Be Attentive to the Tone of Voice
11. Stay in the Present Moment to Respond
12. *Follow your Intuition, not your "Mind"*

In this eBook I'm going to guide you through two specifically structured scripts designed to undermine old, habitual, and defensive ways of talking to your partner in a way that has been proven to generate trust and intimacy in a matter of minutes, even with a stranger. In fact, I recommend that you practice Compassionate Communication with a trusted friend first, especially if you have been having problems with your partner.

I've divided the script into two parts. The first part is structured so that you can do this exercise alone before you try it with someone else, and the second part is designed so that you can teach the strategies to your partner and guide them into a meditative dialog to explore intimate feelings and thoughts as they spontaneously emerge from your imagination, memories, and creativity.

You'll need to practice this exercise two or with three times in order to get a thorough *experiential* sense of its value. You'll also be building new neural

connections in the least developed area in your brain known as the Salience Network which regulates feelings of empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and self-love.

The exercise is designed to alter the tempo and rhythm of speech while you remain in a relaxed state of heightened awareness. It integrates all the strategies we described in the previous chapter in a way that will allow you to bring them in real-life conversations with others. After you've practiced the training exercise below, you'll find that you can vary it and easily bring these strategies into any important conversation – at home and at work.

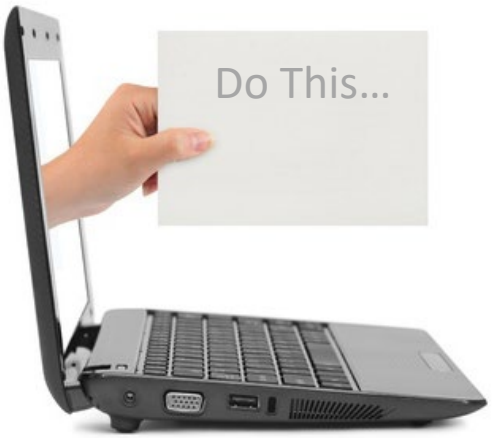


Preparing to Practice

The first ten-minute script will guide you through a relaxation process designed to bring you into the present moment where personal judgments are temporarily suspended. You can do this part alone, in preparation for talking with someone, or you can do it with a friend, family member, or colleague, reading each of the following steps together. I'm assuming that right now you are reading these words alone as you have an imaginary conversation with yourself. This, by the way, is a great strategy to use *before* you need to address a difficult person or discuss an uncomfortable conflict with a family member or friend. By rehearsing how a conversation *may* evolve, you can often predict the best way to communicate your needs. You can also predict, with a fair degree of accuracy, how the other person might react or respond to your words, and this allows you to alter your strategy in ways that would encourage a win-win scenario when the two of you sit down to speak.

However, it's a little tricky to read the steps and practice them at the same time, so here's my suggestion: Simply be mindfully aware of the reading and speaking experience without judging it; there's no right or wrong way and all you need to do is to follow your intuition. Read each sentence out loud, very slowly, and notice how the words make you feel. Alternatively, you can make a recording of this script and play it back, which is particularly advantageous when doing this with another person. Feel free to modify the script in any way you like.

You can also take turns with a partner reading the script to each other. Or consider forming a small group, with several friends, and have one person read the script while others follow. This has the advantage of listening to how different people react and respond, and the positive experiences expressed by others will add support for practicing Compassionate Communication with others.



The Compassionate Communication Script

Let's begin. Find a comfortable chair and a quiet place to sit, where you won't be distracted by people or phone calls. When you see an asterisk, it's a reminder to briefly close your eyes and to relax with a mindful yawn or super-slow stretch. Or, if you have a bell or chime, keep it handy, and ring it when you see the asterisks in the script. It serves as an auditory reminder to slow down, relax, and pause. You can also download a mindfulness bell onto your phone.

The asterisk is also a reminder to pause before you go on to the next sentence. Use that pause – 10 seconds, 60 seconds, even longer if you desire – to observe your feelings, sensations, and thoughts—noting them, and then letting them fade away into silence. With practice, you'll soon begin to integrate these conscious pauses into your everyday conversations. When you finish a sentence, just add an extra 2-3 seconds. This allows the listener's brain to absorb what you said. The brain can only focus on about 10 words but most people speak about 300 words before they pause. The listener will miss most of what you said!

Say each sentence below just loud enough that you can hear your own voice, and speak with greater warmth, going slower than you usually do. I recommend that you cut your speech rate in half. It will fill odd at first but you will be training yourself to communicate better.

STEP 1:

Take a few deep breaths, slowly breathing in and out through your nose.* Now relax all the muscles in your face. Let your forehead relax and let the muscles around your eyes relax. Take another deep breath and relax your jaw.* Now relax all the muscles in your neck.* Take a really deep breath and relax your shoulders. Lift your shoulders up to your ear, and then let them drop. Once more: pull your shoulders up high, hold them up, and then push them down toward the ground.* Breathe in deeply and feel how your chest moves in and out. Take another slow breath as you relax all the muscles in your arms and your hands. Feel the weight of this book in your hands, then close your eyes and use the next few moments to notice how your upper body feels.*

STEP 2:

Take a slow, deep breath and relax all the muscles in your back. Feel all the tension melting away, beginning with the top of your spine and slowly moving down to your hips.* Take several deep breaths and feel how your stomach rises and falls.* Now turn your attention to your legs. Move them from side to side and feel yourself melting into the seat of your chair.* Now bring your attention to your feet. Tighten them, then relax them and shake them out.* Now turn your attention to your entire body. Tighten up all your muscles, hold them tense to the count of five, and then let everything relax.* Once more: tighten up the muscles of your shoulders, arms, and legs. Hold them tight . . . tighter . . . and now relax.* Take a few slow breaths and mentally scan your body, looking for any excess tension in your muscles, your arms, your chest, your neck, and your face. Take another deep breath and let all your tension melt away.* Notice how your body feels and notice the calmness in your mind.

STEP 3:

Now breathe in, and as you breathe out, make a soft sighing sound. Do this again, and then yawn. Yawn again, even if you don't feel like it, because it will make you even more relaxed and alert. Keep yawning for the next minute and notice how each one begins to feel more and more real.* Take another deep breath and feel how relaxed you are becoming. Slowly stretch your arms and legs, and slowly twist your torso from side to side. Do this for another minute in silence.* Pay attention to the sounds in the room; then bring your attention back to your breath and listen to the sounds of each inhalation and exhalation.*

STEP 4:

Visualize someone you deeply love or recall a special moment from the past that fills you with pleasure and joy, something or someone that makes you feel like smiling.* Feel how the muscles of your face begin to change and notice how the muscles around your eyes are softening. Take a few deep breaths, then stretch again as you enjoy this feeling for the next few moments in silence.*

STEP 5:

Ask yourself: what is my deepest, innermost value?* Notice whatever word comes to mind, then return your attention to your breathing.* Now ask yourself this: how important is it to me to be listened to and understood? Notice the thoughts and feelings that come to mind, then let them go.* Take a deep breath and relax some more.* Now ask: what tone of voice will best communicate what I want to say? Notice your thoughts, and let them go.* Shift your attention to your breathing and feel your whole body relax some more.* Now ask yourself: what is the best way to listen when someone else is speaking? Once more, notice the thoughts and feelings that come to mind.*

Take a deep breath, stretch your body, and bring yourself back into the present moment.*

STEP 6:

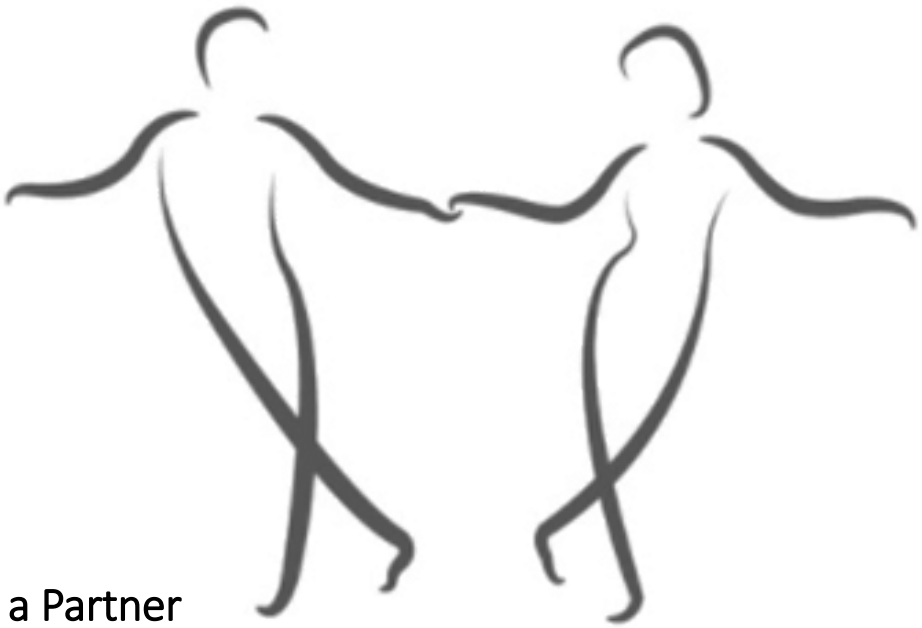
Visualize the person you plan to talk to. Think about a quality that you really like about that person and notice how it makes you feel.* Deepen your breathing as you hold a compassionate thought in your mind. Take a deep breath and continue to relax into your body.* Now visualize yourself talking to this person and paying them a compliment. Tell them what you appreciate about them and imagine that they have a warm gentle smile on their face.* Now imagine that this person is paying you a compliment. What do you hear them say?* What do you imagine they appreciate about you?* Notice how these imaginary comments make you feel.*

STEP 7:

Next imagine that a compassionate dialogue begins to spontaneously unfold with this person. Visualize the two of you sitting there, taking turns speaking slowly and briefly, and fantasize about what is said.* One person speaks a sentence or two slowly, then stops and relaxes, bringing themselves back into the present moment. Then the other person speaks a few slow sentences and pauses, taking a deep breath and relaxing as much as they possibly can.* Keep this fantasy dialogue going for the next minute or two.*

STEP 8:

Bring yourself back into the present moment as you let the fantasy conversation fade away. Take a few deep breaths and relax all the muscles of your face and body, and notice how your overall consciousness has changed.*



Practicing with a Partner

After you have experimented with the "imaginary conversation" script above ask a friend or family member or colleague to practice the exercise with you, along with the series of additional steps described below. When you first practice this technique with another person take two chairs, place them close together, and sit down facing each other. I suggest that you both read the steps out loud. You should be the first reader, since you have experienced the process and will be more comfortable and familiar with the exercise.

You will need to speak slowly so that the other person can become fully immersed in the experience. You can monitor the ideal speed by occasionally asking your partner if they want you to speak slower or faster. Some people feel uncomfortable with very slow speech but for most people the slower the better. You'll probably be surprised at the rate they feel most comfortable with, but since everyone is different, you'll need to tailor your speech to the needs of the listener. I recommend you do this when conversing with anyone.

Have your partner close their eyes if they feel comfortable doing so, because it helps most people to reach a deeper state of relaxed attention. Say one sentence slowly, then pause long enough for your partner to process the information as they explore their feelings and sensations. Tell your partner to lift a finger when they are ready for you to move on to the next sentence. Then, when you engage in the dialogue part of the exercise – where you both have your eyes open – either of you

can lift your finger to remind the other person to slow down or talk more briefly.

In this first practice session don't talk about any difficult issues that either of you currently have. These can be addressed after you've practiced enough times that you both feel confident that you can remain in a relaxed and compassionate state when problems and conflicts are discussed. You can talk about your inner feelings and concerns, or about issues concerning other people, or about the positive aspects of your partner.

If you're not sure what to say or not to say, ask yourself the following question: can the other person hear and respond in a positive, compassionate way to what I want to say? If not, find another statement to make. At a later time, when the two of you have learned to stay in a state of Relaxed Mindful Awareness, you can find a time to discuss more difficult issues.

Begin by guiding your partner through the first five steps above. Ask them to keep their eyes closed. When you pause at each asterisk, shift your attention and study your partner's face. See if you can discern the subtle expressions that convey relaxation, pleasure, or frustration. If you sense any discomfort, ask them to take additional deep breaths and yawn, stretching and moving the parts of their body that you think might be tense.

As you continue to read, try lowering the tone of your voice and speaking a little softer. With each step, slow down a little more. When you have finished reading steps one through five, skip steps six through eight (they're designed for solo practice) and begin to read the script below.

STEP 9:

Visualize the person sitting across from you and smiling.* Stay aware of your breathing as you hold a compassionate image or loving thought in your mind and deepen the relaxation of your body.* Think about something you really appreciate about this person and notice how that makes you feel.* Now think

about another quality that you admire or respect. Again notice how this thought makes you feel.* Affirm to yourself that the conversation you are about to have will be filled with compassion and respect.* Now imagine such a conversation taking place. In your mind you see each person taking turns, speaking only one sentence at a time, slowly and briefly, then pausing. When one of you finishes speaking, you both take a deep breath and relax, pausing for about three seconds before the other person speaks.* Imagine hearing the voice of your partner and no matter what that person says you feel yourself becoming more and more relaxed, and as you listen, your defenses continue to melt away.*

STEP 10:

Continue to visualize the conversation and imagine that a sense of trust and empathy is beginning to build. Let the conversation take any direction it wants. Don't control it; let it spontaneously evolve. Don't try to make a point and don't worry if the subject changes. Just trust what your intuition brings up, staying as relaxed as you can.* There is no need to rush; all you have to do is talk slowly . . . then pause . . . then breathe . . . then listen . . . then relax . . . then talk again, with your voice filled with kindness and love.*

STEP 11:

Now ask yourself this question: what's the most important value that I want to bring into the conversation I'm about to have?* Notice the thoughts and feelings that come to mind, then let them go, bringing yourself back into the present moment.* Now recall a memory that brings you a sense of pleasure, happiness, or joy.* Feel a warm smile begin to form on your face and feel the muscles softening around your eyes.*

STEP 12:

In a moment you will open your eyes and gaze gently at your partner.* Begin the conversation by saying something appreciative or complimentary and listen to the compliment given by the other person.* Don't judge what they say. Just stay focused on your inner sense of well-being.* Let a spontaneous conversation emerge, speaking only one sentence, then stop and relax. Listen deeply as your partner speaks, and when they pause, take another deep breath and relax.* Then say whatever comes to your mind, but before your speak, ask yourself this question: will my words be met with kindness and appreciation?* If not—if you think they will make the other person defensive—take another deep breath and allow a different thought to come to mind.* Continue the dialogue for at least five minutes: talking, pausing, and listening as you stay as relaxed as you can.* Then close with a compliment and a statement of appreciation.

Put down your script and begin to talk with your partner. The conversation should flow quite naturally and easily, and since you'll each be speaking only one sentence, you'll be surprised how quickly it moves into areas that you probably would never have thought about discussing. Sometimes the conversation shifts to deep feelings and concerns about work or an incident that happened in the past. Sometimes a salient memory comes to mind. Or perhaps the conversation might focus on the values that matter most to you.

At other times nothing important comes to mind. If that happens, continue to stay relaxed and allow yourself to become comfortable with the "non-conversation." One of the purposes of this exercise is to interrupt the belief that we have to say something important or meaningful all the time. If we train ourselves to remain neutral, calmness itself will have a beneficial effect on the conversation. In essence you'll be learning how to be in the present moment with another person,

without all the distracting thoughts that pull us away from our deeper nonverbal connection to each other.

Even remaining in silence as you gaze at each other, observing your own inner speech as you stay relaxed, is a powerful experience that has numerous psychological and neurological benefits.

The next time you practice Compassionate Communication you'll discover that the conversation will again take surprising turns. You can also begin to experiment with speaking longer—say two or three sentences at a time. When you do this, the goal is to make sure that the other person is fully engaged in listening to you. If not, it's a clear sign to pause and let the other person respond.

If one person has a tendency to talk longer than thirty seconds, you have several choices. You can simply observe to see if the other person realizes that they've engaged in a monologue, or you can watch how your inner speech reacts. This training exercise is a learning experience, and each time you practice, you'll intuitionally recognize layers of communication that you never noticed before.

If the person continues to speak too long, you can bring this issue into the Compassionate Communication dialogue. Tell them how you feel but tell them briefly, with a warm tone of voice. Many people have deeply embedded unconscious habits, and you may have to gently pull them into the Compassionate Communication model many times before their habits begin to change.

There is another strategy that is quite useful and fun. When a person starts talking too fast or too much, ask them to raise one finger with each word they speak. After 10 words stop, but if you need a few more, you can go to 20 but not more! When you both do this you'll find that it's actually easier to convey something important. You are forcing your mind/brain to select the best possible word. And remember: the listener will only be able to focus on 10 words, sometimes less!



Going Deeper

If both parties are willing, take the conversation to a more intimate level and talk for another five to seven minutes. Close with an appreciative comment and then share your experience with each other. What did you learn or discover? What can you take away from it that you can incorporate into your daily conversations?

Now you can decide if you feel ready to discuss more difficult issues in your relationship. Often one person will feel ready to jump in but the other person will hesitate. My advice: don't push it. Take more time and practice more rounds of Compassionate Communication. In those rounds talk about the concerns you may have, because this is the ideal state in which to establish the necessary ground rules for working through conflicts and problems. Use Compassionate Communication to create a game plan, and discuss how to handle the conversation if one person gets too upset. Also, with very difficult issues, you may both need to agree to use the 10 word / 10 fingers game. It's very hard to get emotionally stuck if you can only speak briefly and then listen.

You can also teach this to a trusted friend who can guide the two into a relaxed state of mindful awareness and help you to stay there.

Usually the conversations that emerge in this exercise are pleasant and constructive, but sometimes they bring up unexpected anxiety, feelings, or uncomfortable memories. For example, some couples begin to worry about what the other person might say. If you are conscious of this, then I suggest that you use the exercise to share those feelings, following the rule of not saying anything you think would be upsetting to the other person. It may take five, ten, or even twenty rounds of practice, but eventually progress will be made. If not, then a NeuroCoach can assist, either with me or with one of my students who are trained in this form of communication.

Sometimes a person's inner anxiety or irritability will make them say something that interrupts your flow. If this happens, I suggest that you don't bring it up in the Compassionate Communication format until you've become proficient at it. Here's my suggestion for couples who want to make a commitment to this methodology. Decide together how often you want to practice each week or month. If the other person isn't available, you can do steps one through eight in your imagination, and then rehearse what you want to say the next time the two of you talk.

Keeping a diary of your experience enhances the process, but don't use your diary to vent. Research has shown that this is quite a destructive act and that it will deepen your inner conflicts and anxiety. Instead use your diary to construct positive solutions and track the positive progress you make.

Compassionate Communication with Strangers?

For most people, the thought of sharing too much intimacy with people they barely know seems unwise. But research shows that speaking intimately to someone you don't know actually lowers stress and improves cardiovascular health! This was tested at the University of Southern Mississippi, with college students who were arbitrarily paired with one another.

Pay It Forward

I hope you'll experiment with this exercise with as many people as possible. First try it with your friends, then your family members, and don't be surprised if you find that your kids can follow the directions better than you! Then try this exercise with a colleague at work. Brevity, clarity, trust, and cooperation are essential for a company's financial success, and any strategy that can stimulate these qualities are readily incorporated into company policy. That's why Compassionate Communication became part of our NeuroLeadership class for Executive MBA students at Loyola Marymount University, and it is now taught at colleges and conferences throughout the world.

Compassionate Communication is easy to teach, and in most sections of the community conducting workshops in it requires little formal training, so consider creating your own version of this popular exercise and pay it forward. Even a single training session with a group of people – ten or a thousand – can dramatically improve communication and conflict resolution.

I'd like to close with one more suggestion. In the educational arena, it turns out that we rarely talk about talking, so try the following experiment with your spouse, your kids, and with your closest friends and colleagues. Ask this question: "What would you like me to change about the way I communicate with you that would improve our interaction?"

It is a question that delights the person who is asked it and it gives them an opportunity to suggest ways to improve your interpersonal relationship. But when I ask roomfuls of people how often they've even considered asking such a question, hardly any hands are raised. Instead you'll hear a lot of nervous laughing, a sign that many already suspect what the other person might say. This suggests that we somehow know, deep down inside, that we are not talking and listening as well as we might. Make this a topic during a formal Compassionate Communication exercise. Ask your partner what you can do to improve the process. Nearly everyone will have something to say, and if you say it with compassion, the other person will often comply.

But what if your partner doesn't want to play or the two of you fail in establishing the rapport you desire? Don't blame yourself or the other person because many people have a communication style that is so unique their partners fail to recognize that they are still being loved and respected. Again, you have such a problem with your partner consider having a Zoom conference call with me. Nearly every couple I've worked with has come away with a much deeper appreciation of each other in one or two sessions. Send an email to my assistant: Oriel@MarkRobertWaldman.com .



Finally, I would love to hear from you about your experiences: the benefits you've gained, the problems you encountered, and any unique variations or new strategies that you have found useful. My aim, as always, is to help you bring a little more peace into your life and to bring that peacefulness into their conversations with others. In that way, we can all bring a little more peace into the world.

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