



**The Family Recovery Foundation
FIX YOUR FAMILY
MODULE 6**

Communication Skills for Difficult Conversations

Opening Statement: The Power of Communication in Family Healing

Communication is the bridge between understanding and connection. In families impacted by addiction, conversations can often feel like battlegrounds—filled with tension, defensiveness, or manipulation. But what if, instead, they became opportunities for healing?

In this module, we focus on **assertive communication**, which allows you to express yourself honestly while maintaining respect for the other person. You'll learn how to use **"I statements"**, develop **active listening skills**, and practice **reflective listening**—powerful tools that can de-escalate conflict and foster genuine connection.

We'll also explore how to navigate **manipulation tactics** that can make conversations feel overwhelming or unproductive. By recognizing these patterns and responding with clarity and strength, you can shift the dynamic toward healthier interactions.

Let's dive in and start **transforming communication into a tool for healing**.

1. Assertive Communication Techniques:

Assertive communication is a balanced and respectful way of expressing thoughts, feelings, and needs while also considering the perspectives of others. It falls between **passive communication** (avoiding conflict and suppressing needs) and **aggressive**

communication (demanding, blaming, or dominating others). Assertiveness allows you to **stand firm in your truth** while maintaining connection and respect in relationships.

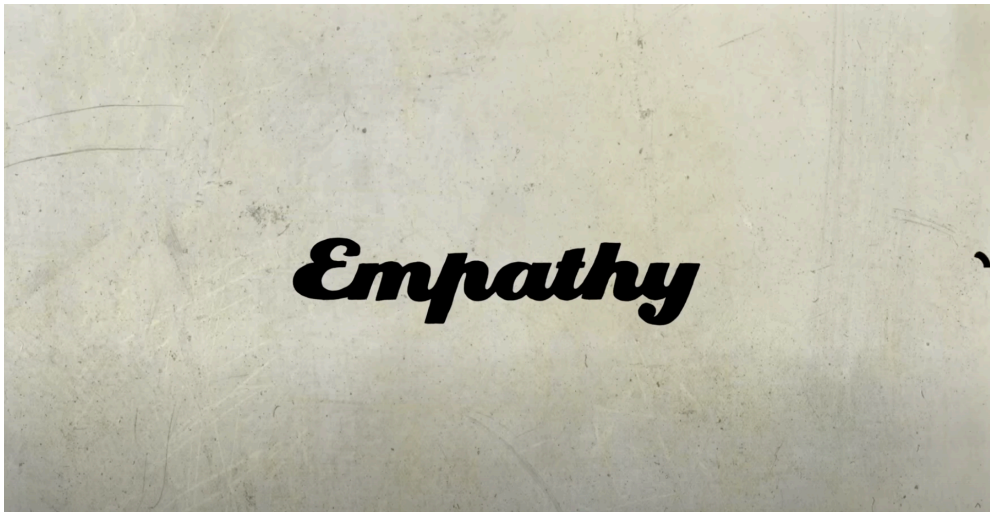
I Statements: Learn to express your feelings and needs without blame or bait.

Using *"I language"* in recovery helps families express their needs without blame, which lowers defensiveness and opens the door to real connection. Saying "I feel hurt when..." instead of "You always..." allows tough conversations to become moments of closeness instead of conflict. Even when emotions are high, this kind of language can draw families closer—offering a path to healing, honesty, and lasting trust.

- ✗ *"You don't care about my feelings!"*
✓ *"I feel hurt right now and so disconnected from you."*
- ✗ *"You never help out around the house."*
✓ *"I feel overwhelmed when the chores pile up, are you available to help?"*
- ✗ *"You always make me feel bad about myself."*
✓ *"I feel really upset and sad right now."*
- ✗ *"You never listen to me."*
✓ *"I feel unheard right now. Can you tell me what you are hearing me say?"*
- ✗ *"Stop ignoring me!"*
✓ *"I feel disconnected from you and I'd love to reconnect."*
- ✗ *"You only care about using, not about this family!"*
✓ *"I am in so much pain right and when there is chronic relapse I struggle with trust."*
- ✗ *"You're ruining your life, and I can't watch this anymore!"*
✓ *"Seeing you struggle with this level of addiction is painful for me, and I am going to need to start taking care of myself."*
- ✗ *"You're just manipulating me to get what you want."*
✓ *"I feel uncomfortable right now, (don't get into the details of why, I don't like how I feel in this conversation,) let me know when you're ready for clarity and solution."*

- **X** *“I’m done bailing you out—you never change!”*
✓ *“I love you very much and I am sorry this keeps happening in your life. I also want you to know I won’t continue to do this anymore.”*
- **X** *“You always lie to me—I can’t trust you!”*
✓ *“I feel betrayed right now, this is going to take time for me to figure out and to build back my trust. I am really upset and sad.”*

Active Listening: Practice listening to understand, not to respond. Show empathy and validate the other person’s feelings. Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, creator of Nonviolent Communication (NVC).



CLICK HERE: <https://youtu.be/1Ewgu369Jw?si=kbRBkoPPwiNeg2zF>

Empathy creates connection.

Healing begins when people feel seen, heard, and emotionally met.

- Empathy is not fixing.

It is the ability to sit with someone's pain without trying to solve it, correct it, or make it go away.

- Sympathy creates distance.

Responses like "at least..." or "look on the bright side" can unintentionally minimize pain.

- Empathy sounds like:

"I'm here with you."

"That sounds really hard."

"You're not alone in this."

- In family recovery, empathy means presence over control.

Instead of rescuing, lecturing, or trying to force change, we practice emotional presence.

- Empathy does not mean enabling.

We can hold boundaries while still offering compassion and understanding.

- Connection helps regulate the nervous system.

Feeling emotionally safe often reduces shame, defensiveness, and isolation.

- People heal when they feel understood, not judged.

2. Reflective Listening

Reflective Listening creates true understanding.

Reflective listening is a communication strategy involving two key steps: seeking to understand the speaker, then offering the idea back to the speaker, to confirm the idea has been understood correctly. It is not mirroring back a speaker's exact words. It digs deeper with empathy, neutrality, with the goal to connect.

KEY: Reflecting one's meaning is the most complex reflective listening skill available. This goes beyond content and feelings to the underlying beliefs and values of the speaker.

Reflective Listening Hints which Disarm:

- ✓ *"I hear that you see it differently. Can you tell me more about your perspective?"
(Maintaining eye contact and nodding to show engagement)*
- ✓ *"I understand that this is really important to you. Let me think about it."*
- ✓ *"I can see why you feel that way. That must be tough."*
- ✓ *"It sounds like you experienced it differently than I did. Let's talk through it."*
- ✓ *"So from your perspective you feel..."*
- ✓ *"You wish you could live here and be left alone..."*
- ✓ *"It sounds like you...."*
- ✓ *"So from your vantage point..."*
- ✓ *"You feel unseen, like no one understands what you are going through..."*
- ✓ *"For you, you wish everyone would just leave you alone and let you be..."*

Empathy has the heart to disarm.

You don't have to panic because you always have your boundaries.

Sit in the reflection. Use it to disarm.

Example:

A **loved one** calls home, expressing **frustration and resistance** toward continuing in treatment and attending sessions. They share that their treatment team is scheduling a therapy session to discuss their reluctance. They feel **angry and forced** into treatment by their family.

Common Responses & How to Improve Them:

✗ **Confrontational Response:**

"You are in this situation because you put yourself there. I can't believe you can't see that!"

✓ **Simple Reflection (Acknowledges Their Feelings):**

"Sounds like you're really frustrated about having to attend this group."

✓ **Complex Reflection (Digs Deeper into Their Experience):**

"I realize that it wasn't your idea to go to treatment, and I imagine it feels unbelievable to you that you're even there. I know this is difficult and I am confident you will make the right decision with your treatment team." (Remember, you can show empathy, because you always have your own perspective and have your boundaries).

3. Addressing Manipulation Tactics

Identifying Manipulation: Learn to recognize common manipulation tactics such as guilt-tripping, gaslighting, and passive-aggressiveness. **Responding Effectively:** Use assertive communication to address manipulation. For example, “I understand and hear that you’re upset. I feel different than you about this and need to stick to my decision.”

Example 1: Setting Boundaries

Parent:

“Unfortunately, I’m no longer able to give you money because I feel it’s contributing to your addiction, and it doesn’t feel right for me.”

Loved One:

“You don’t care about me. You’re abandoning me. What am I supposed to do now?”

Parent:

“I hear that this feels really upsetting. I care about you and will support you in ways that feel good not just for you but for me too, and I’m still going to hold this boundary.”

Example 2: Addressing Relapse

Sibling:

“I’ve noticed the changes recently, and I’m not ok and I am concerned. I care about you and I’m worried about your safety.”

Loved One:

“It’s just a slip. I can handle it.”

Sibling:

“I hear you. At the same time, this is impacting me and our relationship, and it’s hard for me to watch. It would mean a lot to me if you would consider getting support. If things continue this way, I may need to change how I show up in the relationship. I’m also not comfortable continuing to cover for this with mom and dad. Let me know tomorrow what you think.”

Example 3: Asking for Professional Help

Spouse:

“Would you be open to seeing a counselor together?”

Loved One:

“I don’t need a counselor. I can stop on my own.”

Spouse:

“I understand that’s what you want, and I respect that is how you feel. At the same time, I have been here and I need something to change. I’m asking that we try something different and get support. If you choose not to go, I will still be going on my own. It would mean a lot to me if you joined me.”

Example 4: Expressing Concerns About Behavior

Parent:

“I’ve been feeling unsettled lately when we’re together, and I’m noticing some behaviors that concern me. My nervous system does not feel good and I need this home to be steady.”

Qualifier:

“You’re always on my case. I’m fine.”

Parent:

“I hear that you feel that way. From my perspective, something is not right, and I care about what’s going on with you. I’d like to understand more so I can support you. If this continues and I keep feeling this way, I will begin drug testing for my own peace of mind.”

Example 5: Discussing Impact on the Family

Family Member:

“This situation is affecting me, and it’s impacting our family. There’s a lot of stress and concern, and I’m recognizing that I need support as well.”

Loved One:

“This is my problem, not yours. Stay out of it.”

Family Member:

“I understand that’s how you see it. At the same time, all of this is affecting my life and our home and my peace. I’m no longer willing to live in a constant state of stress. I’m going to begin making changes to take care of myself and create a healthier

environment here. I love you, and I truly hope you choose to be part of that. I'm going to schedule time with a therapist. I will let you know when and where. If you choose to attend that would mean the world. If not, I will let you know what my decisions are after the session."

Discussion Points

1. **Importance of Assertiveness:** Discuss how being assertive, rather than passive or aggressive, leads to healthier interactions.
2. **Challenges in Setting Boundaries:** Share personal experiences and challenges faced when setting boundaries.
3. **Handling Manipulation:** Discuss specific situations where manipulation was encountered and how it was handled.

Resources

1. **Books:**
 - "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life" by Marshall Rosenberg
 - "The Gifts of Imperfection" by Brené Brown
2. **Support Groups:** Al-Anon or similar support groups focusing on communication skills for families of addicts.

Goals for the Week

- Practice using "I statements" and active listening in everyday interactions.
- Set and communicate one new boundary with a loved one.