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PARAPHRASING AS A TOOL TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Conflict occurs between two people when one or both feel that they are not being heard fully and their needs are not being met. Communication skills are the building blocks of effectively resolving conflict. Effective communication occurs when two people work to fully hear the messages of the other.

Paraphrasing is the technique of listening for the purpose of reflecting back to the other person the content (information) and feeling (emotion) of what they are saying.

When you paraphrase someone, they will do one of three things: They will correct you if you have paraphrased incorrectly; they will add more if they feel you have understood everything they have said so far; they will stop when they feel you have understood their story fully.

1. Choose which of you is going to talk and which is going to listen first. The talker begins by expressing their thoughts on the issue that is producing the conflict. The listener paraphrases the content and feeling in what their partner is saying.
2. Once the first person feels completely heard on the issue, the listener validates everything the talker said that can be validated.
3. The listener then asks their partner if they would like to know what it felt like for them to hear the information that was conveyed.
4. The listener then becomes the talker and shares the content and feeling of their response as their partner paraphrases them!
5. If it is necessary, the partnership can repeat this process until both feel they are completely understood by the other.

Talkers often feel uncomfortable when they are effectively paraphrased. Most of us go through life expecting not to be heard and deeply understood, which leads to defensiveness, anger, and using power struggles to compensate for the feelings of powerlessness. When someone first takes the time to listen to us for understanding, we may feel exposed, vulnerable, or embarrassed.

Listeners often feel clumsy and unnatural when they begin to communicate in this way, since this is a communication style that most people have not practiced. They may feel disempowered, put down, and cheated out of their say. However, when people agree to trust the process and carry the exercise to completion, both have the opportunity to be fully heard by the other, and it becomes easier to use these skills more consistently.