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COACHING

TRUTH TALKING: COMMUNICATING FROM YOUR HEART

How often do you really say what you mean when you're cross? Do you hide your anger and/or frustration behind a veil of politeness? Revealed perhaps by the slight edge in your voice, or the tinge of sarcasm? When your boundaries are breached do you swing between ignoring it and flying off the handle? Truth Talking is a method of communication that allows you to say anything and everything with grace and ease. It takes a bit of practice, but once mastered it is very powerful tool that can be used in both your personal and professional relationships.

The way we normally say things...

When we try and convey our feelings when our emotions are running high, most of us fluctuate between passive politeness or judging/blaming/aggression. Let me give you some examples. In the family home, children can typically drive their parent's nuts over their lack of desire to tidy up after themselves. A mum might typically say things like:

"This room looks like a bomb has hit it!"

"Why don't you ever tidy up?"

"I suppose I'm expected to pick up the towels?"

"Please tidy up!"

"You never tidy up! I'm not your *skivvy*. Go and tidy your room *now!*"

I used all of the above and versions thereof on my children from when they were tots until they were teens. When I lost my rag, something usually happened. But the tidying was rarely done willingly and once I had calmed down, their old, untidy habits soon returned. Children will be children, but this ineffective way of communicating permeates many different areas of our lives.

Why is talking like this ineffective? Because we filter what we hear from other people. If we hear general comments that are not addressed to us directly, and where a response would involve us doing things we don't want to do, then the filter simply draws the conclusion that the statement doesn't apply to us. So expressions of exasperation like, "This room looks like a bomb has hit it" will usually be ignored.

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Sentences addressed as “You don’t...”, or “Why don’t you...” are filtered that we are being judged, not accepted for what are or what we have done. We will immediately put our barriers up ready to defend ourselves and in the process will often not fully hear what has been said. Even a child when accused of “Why don’t you ever tidy up?” will often retort by telling you they tidied up on such-and-such occasion.

Sarcasm rarely works – with children or adults. Some people find it humorous, but often the person hearing the message will be unsure of what is intended. Comments like, “I suppose *I’m* expected to pick up the towels?” will often be greeted with silence.

The “*Please* tidy up!” plea sometimes works. But as it is not directed by name, the filter can deduce it isn’t intended for them – even if they are the only one in the room! The response to this plea will depend on the relationship but can easily be ignored too.

In the final example, “You never tidy up! I’m not your *skivvy*. Go and tidy your room *now!!*” An out-burst of anger from a parent to young child, will usually send the child by scurrying to do some tidying – but begrudgingly. The child won’t feel good about it because they have been told off. The parent has gone to red-rag stage and so even after the child has done some tidying, praising the child genuinely will be hard to do. If this approach is used with teenagers or adults, more than likely a full-blown argument will follow and it’s likely that neither party will win.

How to start using Truth Talking

Truth Talking is designed so the person you are speaking to, hears your message fully (that is, the filter doesn’t step in – at least not so much!). The simple rules are:

- Tell the truth about how you are feeling
- Begin your sentences with: “*I...*” as opposed to “*You...*”
- Genuinely acknowledge the other person.
- Keep all of your sentences very short.
- Keep it to the point – extra details just weaken what you are trying to say.
- Use the person’s name when addressing them.
- Ensure your voice is in ‘charge neutral’.

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When we were 4–6 years old we used a lot of Truth Talking: “I want this...”, “I need it!”. But at that age, we are also getting to grips with right and wrong and we don’t have the ability to say things gracefully. Our parents correct our *I wants* with messages such as: “It’s not, *I want*, it’s, *Please may I have*”. Or in moment of frustration even “Wants don’t get!”. From this early age we take on board that starting our sentences with ‘I’ is not socially acceptable. Unfortunately, it’s rare for anyone to teach us in our teens how we could begin again to use ‘I’ but in a graceful manner. So conversations with a high emotion factor, swing from polite passive to aggressive completely bypassing assertive.

Some of the strongest Truth Talking sentences begin with:

“I am... or I’m...”
“I need...” and
“I feel...”

They are strong because unless you are a great actor, it’s hard to say these words and be dishonest at the same time. Trying saying, “I am happy” when you are sad, lonely or frustrated. It’s really difficult, isn’t it? Likewise when you hear someone say “I’m feeling sad” – the truth of it is so powerful, that it’s very difficult to ignore.

We are not blaming anyone when we say “I...” it’s just a statement of truth as long as our voice is in charge neutral. Charge neutral means our voice needs to be even in it’s tonality, with no hidden agenda behind what you are saying. It’s simply a message from the heart. This is probably the hardest part to master in Truth Talking, because frequently we want to blame the other person and judging can still be heard by the filter even if it’s disguised as “I...” instead of “You...”.

By genuinely acknowledging someone before you tell them what is in your heart, you get their full attention and again, your message is less likely to be distorted by their filter. Genuine acknowledgement involves telling the person what you know to be true in what is going on for them in this situation.

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Keeping your sentences really short and to the point helps the other person hear what you are saying too. Contrast these two ways of wife talking to her husband:

“No-one is listening to me! I keep telling everyone about tidying up and keeping the house in some sort of order and it’s like I’m talking double dutch for all the impact it has. John leaves everything everywhere – his room is like a pigsty. I need you to help me with the kids – they can’t keep expecting me to keep picking up after them. And my mother is coming tomorrow, and if she sees the house like *this!*”

Although, the above is using some of the techniques needed for effective Truth Talking, it loses its power because it’s going off in many tangents and it’s hard for the listener to really know what the salient parts of the message are. A better approach would be:

“I know you’re been really busy, but I need your help. I am upset because the house is in such a mess. Can you talk to John about his room and then help me a little? I need to have the house straight before my mother comes tomorrow.”

Truth Talking when you are really upset also allows you to stop yourself going too far. See the power you have if you can express yourself like this:

“I’m really angry. I know I’m not handling this very well. I’m going for a walk. I need to calm down – then I want to talk to you some more about this”

Using Truth Talking naturally takes time, but with practice it will become second nature. You will be amazed how easy it is for you to be heard and also how much easier your life becomes as people respond more willingly to your requests for help! Try it today and see what a difference it makes!

Note: Truth Talking is a technique I coach to many people. It’s a blend of many different ideas and practices, but one of my biggest influences was Tim Ursiny, a fellow coach who coined the phrase TruthTalk in his excellent book: *The Coward’s Guide to Conflict*. For a review and more information on this book, please see www.reddandelion.co.uk/books.html

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