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# Proactively and In the Heat of the Moment: Administrative Advice for Communication Instructors to Help Students Cope With Crisis

JENNIFER H. WALDECK

Concerned teachers hope to help students avoid physical and emotional harm that may result from unhappy familial and domestic relationships, domestic violence, date rape, verbal abuse, and other punitive relational experiences. However, too often they encounter students who are already victims of dysfunctional family or personal relationship patterns. A frustration that is common to caring teachers is the desire to “fix” students’ problems, but in an age of litigiousness, teaching assistants and professors must be cautious in dispensing advice they may not be professionally qualified to give. As a result of a well-meaning instructor’s efforts on a student’s behalf, she or he may end up inflicting more harm than help. Importantly, we are trained to teach students, but not act as therapists or intervention counselors. Thus, we are in a position to help students *avoid* personal tragedy by providing them with knowledge of communication theory, research, and skills. Our role in helping students who are in the midst of crisis is less direct and should involve referring them to experts trained to advise them.

The first section of this paper overviews communication research that is pertinent to helping students be prepared proactively to deal with relationship crises, such as violence and verbal aggressiveness, date rape, and relationship termination. Second, the paper focuses on strategies that teachers of interpersonal communication survey courses may use to deal with students who are already victims of these situations, and as a result, may be emotionally troubled, abusing drugs or alcohol, or have suicidal feelings. Many of the strategies suggested here are grounded in the same material we teach our students about effective listening, caring, and empathy; consequently, instructors could partially resolve the difficulty of dealing with troubled students by actually practicing the communication skills they teach!

## HELPING STUDENTS BE PROACTIVE REGARDING RELATIONSHIP CRISES

While Duck (1994) notes that the communication discipline typically focuses on the positive aspects of relating interpersonally (e.g., support, intimacy, love, romance, and maintenance), a well-balanced interpersonal communication course should also introduce students to the "dark side of interpersonal communication" (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). In discussions and informal interviews the author conducted with communication faculty at a number of large universities, professors report a variety of reasons for not addressing the negative aspects of interpersonal interaction, including lack of time, lack of coverage in the adopted textbook, or a social desirability effect (i.e., not wanting to focus on negative topics because students will perceive the class to be a "downer"). Fortunately, a number of communication scholars recognize, as we all should, that exposing students to the research on the role of communication in relationship dysfunction and decay is a direct way of influencing students; it provides them with strategies for avoiding or coping effectively with negative relationship experiences.

A large body of interpersonal communication research focuses on destructive relationship patterns (see, for example, deTurck, 1987; Marshall, 1994 [physical abuse and aggression]; Berger, 1994; Bradac, Wiemann, & Schaefer, 1982 [dominance and power]; Leathers, 1979 [double binds and inconsistent messages]; Infante, 1987; Infante & Wigley, 1986 [aggressiveness and argumentativeness]; Levine & McCornack, 1992; Metts, 1997 [deception and transgressions in close relationships]). Research findings in these areas are summarized in a number of basic hybrid and interpersonal communication texts (DeFleur, Kearney & Plax, 1998; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, Sudweeks, & Stewart, 1995; Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; O'Hair, Friedrich, Wiemann, & Wiemann, 1997; Pearson & Spitzberg, 1990; Trenholm & Jensen, 1996; Wood, 1997) and should be presented in the survey course on interpersonal relationships to increase student awareness of: 1) what a dysfunctional communication pattern within a relationship is, 2) the relationship between certain communicative acts and physical violence, 3) behavioral predictors of physical or psychological abuse, and 4) practices such as education and increased levels of self-assertiveness that can decrease the likelihood of relational dysfunction.

While professors may already focus on a number of these topics, the material may be framed to highlight each concept's relationship to negative interaction patterns. For instance, most interpersonal communication instructors already discuss assertiveness and responsiveness in their courses. To point out how assertiveness may be used in deflecting abuse, the instructor could use a series of simple examples within the context of his/her established lecture. In this way, the "dark side" of interpersonal communication is touched upon without adding additional units to an already full instructional package.

Related to the issue of proactively coping with relational dysfunction, the interpersonal course (especially upper division or advanced courses in which topics may be explored in greater depth than the basic course) is a forum for increasing student sensitivity to what researchers have identified as harmful communication acts. Unfortunately, not all students know what a negative relationship experience is. Put another way, if an individual has experienced the same pattern of relating consistently (e.g., within the family since childhood), he or she may not know that it is a negative state which could be avoided. Marshall (1994) provides a typology of psychologically abusive acts by relational partners (e.g., encouragement of dependence, punishment, deception, verbal aggression, withdrawal, and embarrassment). Moreover, she links each psychologically abusive act to emotional distress and the likelihood of physical violence within the relationship. Presenting these and similar research findings will increase students' awareness of what is

and what is not a physically or psychologically harmful act, and which emotionally abusive tactics might lead to violence.

Once dysfunctional communication patterns have been defined, instructors should focus on the research that indicates predictors of various negative relational cycles. One important area of research links higher levels of verbal aggressiveness to increased likelihood of engaging in physical violence (deTurck, 1987; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Spitzberg & Marshall, 1990, 1991). With knowledge of these research findings, students have a greater ability to detect aggressive communication cues that may lead to violence within relationships.

An additional area of communication research that is salient to avoiding relationship trauma focuses on assertiveness. Generally defined as a constructive communication trait (Lorr & More, 1980), higher levels of assertiveness may aid individuals in avoiding situations such as date rape and physical and/or psychological abuse. In fact, findings demonstrate a relationship between assertiveness and satisfactory relationship experiences (Smolen, Spiegel, Bakker-Rabdau, Bakker, & Martin, 1985). Thus, an instructional unit on the differences between constructive assertiveness and destructive aggressiveness should be included in the interpersonal course. A discussion of assertiveness should include communication tactics (e.g., verbal intensity, talkativeness, volume, affect, inflection (Belleck, Hersen, & Turner, 1979; Bordewick & Bornstein, 1980; Miller & Hersen 1973)) and examples or role plays of specific messages that demonstrate individuals' abilities to act in their own best interest, defend their rights without undue anxiety, express honest feelings, and exercise their rights without denying others' rights.

Moreover, research on communication competence (Gurien, 1996; Rubin, 1982; 1985; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 1989; Wiemann, 1977) provides students with a prescriptive approach for avoiding or coping effectively with negative relationship experiences. Specifically, the competence model suggests that knowledge about effective relationship practices, experience in a wide variety of communication/relationship contexts, motivation to communicate effectively, and positive attitudes about a communication situation predict one's ability to handle various relationship challenges. Ironically, though, Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) note that the ability to improve one's own communication competence and the communication behavior of a relational partner may be the two most difficult aspects of interpersonal relationships. Thus, communication instructors should stress to their students that relational conflict, decay, and disengagement are common and often unavoidable even for skilled communicators. Consequently, interaction patterns for coming apart should be studied in the basic and advanced interpersonal courses, with an emphasis placed on the need to learn from prior communication mistakes.

Whatever framework an instructor uses to discuss relational break-ups, students should exit the course with a greater awareness of what a deteriorating relationship looks and feels like, and whether or not it is salvageable. While these might seem to be easily identifiable relationship states, frequent discussions with students indicate that a great number of them do not know when a relationship is in trouble or over.

### **COUNSELING STUDENTS WHO ARE EXPERIENCING TROUBLE**

The previous section overviewed several key areas of research that instructors can share with students to help them avoid or cope effectively with negative relational experiences. Obviously, many communication instructors already include such material in their courses and are comfortably adept at doing so. However, when students approach us who are not coping effectively — who have experienced or are currently experiencing domestic violence, rape (by an acquaintance or stranger), and resulting depression, substance abuse, or suicidal feelings — we must realize our limitations as advocates and advisors.

This section provides advice for teachers who are asked by their students to provide counsel outside of class in times of crisis. In simple terms, communication instructors must be practitioners of the material they teach — often, material that is *easier* taught than practiced for instructors under the pressure of a distressed student.

#### *Establish a Climate of Trust/Encourage Extra Class Communication*

Instructional communication researchers have long been aware that being an authority on the subject matter and a good classroom manager are necessary but insufficient conditions for good teaching. In fact, when students perceive us as mature authority figures, they may be more inclined to turn to us in times of personal crisis. Thus, the first step instructors can take to help students who are experiencing difficulty is to establish a climate of trust both in and out of the classroom.

Most student disclosure regarding personal issues takes place outside the classroom, during office hours. Students frequently come to us with “excuses” for not completing assignments or missing class that are related to family problems, relationship difficulties, etc. Teachers should not immediately dismiss these excuses as invalid or the behavior as irresponsible. For example, a student recently came to my office to ask if she could turn in a paper a day late because her boyfriend had locked her out of their house and set her clothes on fire in the yard. Was her biggest worry the ten point assignment she had not completed? Like other students who engage in similar self-disclosure with their instructors, the answer is obviously no. Rather, students want their trusted instructors’ advice in solving very serious, real problems in their lives.

While most professors are not in a position to give clinical advice, they should engage in behaviors that communicate to students that they can be trusted, and will direct students to expert resources for help. Since most student disclosure takes place during office hours or outside of the classroom, faculty should engage in behaviors that encourage extra-class communication (ECC — communication between faculty and students outside of formal instruction). Teachers who exhibit an interactive classroom style show interest in students which in turn is interpreted by students as an indicator of the teacher’s accessibility for and willingness to engage in ECC (Snow, 1973). Research findings send a clear message to teachers who wish to create a climate of trust: (1) engage in verbally and nonverbally immediate classroom behaviors that promote teacher-student interaction outside the classroom, and (2) communicate to students your trustworthiness, authority, and the overall value of seeking your help (Shepard, 1996; Snow, 1973).

#### *Avoid “Pop Psych” Techniques*

As communication researchers and teachers, we are aware that much of the “pop psych” or self-help literature has no sound research basis. In other words, while most of what we read in the popular press about helping distressed individuals seems intuitively correct, or the “right” thing to do, it often contradicts what science says. So, avoid using these popular techniques touted in trade books and on talk shows — unless you know of sound research that validates their use.

In this era of litigiousness, giving the wrong advice to a troubled student could mean guilt at best and legal trouble at worst for a well-meaning professor. Unless an instructor is expertly qualified to dispense clinical advice to distressed students, the best advice is a referral to professional counseling services. On most campuses, these are free to students and confidential. One approach an instructor can take is to 1) state his or her concerns to the student and recommendation that professional advice be sought, and 2) call campus counseling services with the student present, and hand the telephone to the student (University of California, Counseling and Career Services, 1997). Often, all it takes for a student to begin solving his or her problem is a concerned professor’s guidance to the

appropriate expert. Remember, because you are familiar to your students, they will often come to you first, unaware of other available resources. Your campus counseling service can make further suggestions for approaches to take with a troubled student; make sure that you have a specific contact or know the general number for your campus counseling center.

### *Listen Effectively and Appropriately*

When approached by a distressed student, teachers should exercise the empathic and nonjudgemental listening skills they provide their own students. When listening, do not overreact to a student's situation (Watson & Barker, 1985); he or she wants to be reassured or helped. Instead, assure the student that violence, substance abuse, neglect, and other tragedies occur in many seemingly "normal" families and relationships. Do not give the student false hope or invalidate what he or she is feeling: for example, avoid comments such as "get a good night's sleep, everything will be better tomorrow," or "crying won't help" (University of California Counseling and Career Services, 1997). Instead, take the student seriously and let him or her know that while you are not trained to intervene, there are experts who can help. Compassionate, empathic listening is appropriate; however, recall that unless you are trained to deal with the student's problem, suspend judgement or advice.

Adopting a systematic plan for listening to troubled students can be helpful in improving professors' ability to understand them and respond appropriately. The same strategies for listening effectively that we teach our students are appropriate, including active concentration, visible alertness, eye contact, forward lean, role-taking, asking questions, and suspension of judgement. Other recommendations include 1) ensuring the student's privacy, 2) smiling or laughing when appropriate (to relieve tension), and 3) removing extra stimulation from the environment — however, closing the office door is typically a risky practice (University of California Counseling and Career Services, 1997). While teachers hope that these types of interactions will be infrequent, listening effectiveness increases with experience.

### *Know Who the Experts Are and How to Contact Them*

Finally, college instructors should keep a list of campus and community resources for assisting with students who may have a range of problems, including domestic violence, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, or suicidal feelings. All teachers should have a list of telephone numbers for the campus health center, counseling services, police, and emergency medical service. Additionally, most communities have crisis hotlines and referral services. Call your campus health center or counseling service for a complete list.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS**

This essay has advocated, first, a focus on what Canary and Spitzberg (1994) refer to as "the dark side of interpersonal communication" as a way of providing sound research and theory that can make a difference in students' own interpersonal relationships. To be sure, many instructors devote time during their interpersonal communication courses to topics that may be perceived as "dark," and their efforts should be applauded. Others of us, however, continue to learn the importance of focusing on negative, as well as positive, relationship features in our courses — and struggle with the awkwardness of doing so.

Pragmatically, our already-crowded syllabi have little room for additional pedagogical units and/or our textbooks might not cover such topics. Emotionally, we may experience difficulty incorporating "heavy" discussions of issues such as verbal and physical abuse, emotional loss, and aggressiveness into our instruction. In this paper, a list of basic

interpersonal and hybrid textbooks is provided which give ample coverage to the topics discussed. In addition, instructors may integrate "the dark side" of interpersonal communication into their established instructional packages through the use of simple examples, brief discussions, and laboratory or writing assignments without adding or deleting units. And, as many of us have experienced, sometimes our "heaviest" and most emotion-laden classroom discussions are stimulating and appreciated by students.

An alternative to discussing the issues presented in this paper in the interpersonal course would be establishing an entire upper division course dedicated to negative interaction patterns. In such a course, these issues could be treated in depth. Moreover, such a course might appeal to the students who need the information most.

The second focus of this essay is the instructor's role *outside of instruction* in dealing with troubled students. Primarily, communication faculty should practice what they teach! However, in teacher/student interactions where power and status differ, the instructor may be compelled to take a paternal/maternal approach, or to act as an advisor or therapist. To take such a position is shortsighted. Instead, the use of appropriate empathic listening tactics, establishing a trusting communication climate with students, knowledge of trained experts, and reliance on sound research rather than "pop psych" techniques are all desirable strategies for dealing with a student in trouble.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the communication instructor's role in helping students avoid or cope with relationship distress and dysfunctional domestic communication patterns. Given the prevalence of student problems, interpersonal communication instructors should include within their instructional packages 1) units on destructive relationship patterns, 2) research findings which indicate predictors of negative relationship cycles, and 3) skills training that may help students correct problems. Although communication faculty often are perceived to be immediate and thus approached by troubled students, most are rarely qualified to dispense or perform counseling duties. Recommendations are made here for avoiding the numerous problems that might result from their willingness to advise a student in trouble.

Although most communication researchers and teachers are not expert clinicians, we are experts at relational communication, and consequently have an important responsibility to our students regarding instruction on negative interpersonal communication patterns. Moreover, because we are often perceived as warm, approachable, and caring communicators, we must be prepared to deal competently with troubled students who seek our advice by practicing much of the same material we teach. Finally, as researchers, we are compelled to continue the focus on the "dark side" of interpersonal communication as a way to learn more about relationship dysfunction and communicate that knowledge to our students.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

**Jennifer H. Waldeck** (M.A., California State University, Long Beach, 1996) is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara.

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