

Let's talk about interpersonal communication. How do you decide whether to speak with a person face-to-face or send a text? What if you had to choose between calling and texting? A lot depends on the situation and the other person. Or does it?

According to a report issued by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, we now communicate more often via text. In fact, more than one-third of young adults send on average more than one hundred texts per day, making the text message their focal communication strategy—their “go to” form of interaction.¹ Quite simply, for many of us texting is our dominant daily mode of communicating.²

Are you among the two-thirds of people more likely to use your cell phone to text your friend rather than talk to her on the cell? And how do you want your friend to get in touch with you? Do you prefer her to call and talk to you over the phone, or would

you rather she text too? Your answer likely depends on how frequently you text and whether you think of texting as easier and more convenient than other communication channels.

How do you decide whether to speak with a person face-to-face or send a text?

We have an abundance of communication choices at our disposal. With so many available options, making the right choice is not always easy, and not necessarily the one most favor. Our goal is to help you explore the benefits your choices present. While recognizing the range of communication technologies open to you, this book will help you improve your skills and develop your abilities to communicate most effectively and appropriately with others—to make sound decisions about how to communicate—whether by text messaging, using social networking sites, calling on a cell phone or landline, instant messaging, e-mailing, or talking face-to-face.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Before continuing your reading of this chapter, which of the following five statements do you believe to be true and which do you believe to be false?

- | | | | |
|--|-----|---|-----|
| 1. Communication is normally intentional. | T F | 4. Interpersonal communication affects your health. | T F |
| 2. Interpersonal communication always is between two people. | T F | 5. Machines are altering the nature of interpersonal communication. | T F |
| 3. If you already consider yourself a good communicator, then how you engage others does not need to change. | T F | | |

Read the chapter to discover if you're right or if you've made any erroneous assumptions.

ANSWERS: 1. F; 2. T; 3. F; 4. T; 5. T



Interpersonal communication is a fact of life.

We do it daily. We do it with people we have known all our lives, and we do it with people we have just met. Every day, we engage in interpersonal communication with family, friends, and strangers alike, face-to-face and online, in person and via our phones. Through our personal contacts, we build connections and establish relationships to satisfy our social needs and realize our personal goals. As we relate to others, the messages we send and receive shape us. In fact, there is a direct link between how good we are at communicating and how satisfying or fulfilling we find life.³ Let's look more closely at the process known as interpersonal communication.

WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Communication is our link to humanity. In its broadest sense, it is a process involving the deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning. One person does or says something, thereby engaging in symbolic behavior, while others observe what was done or said and attribute meaning to it. Whenever you observe or give meaning to behavior, communication is taking place.



WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

True or False

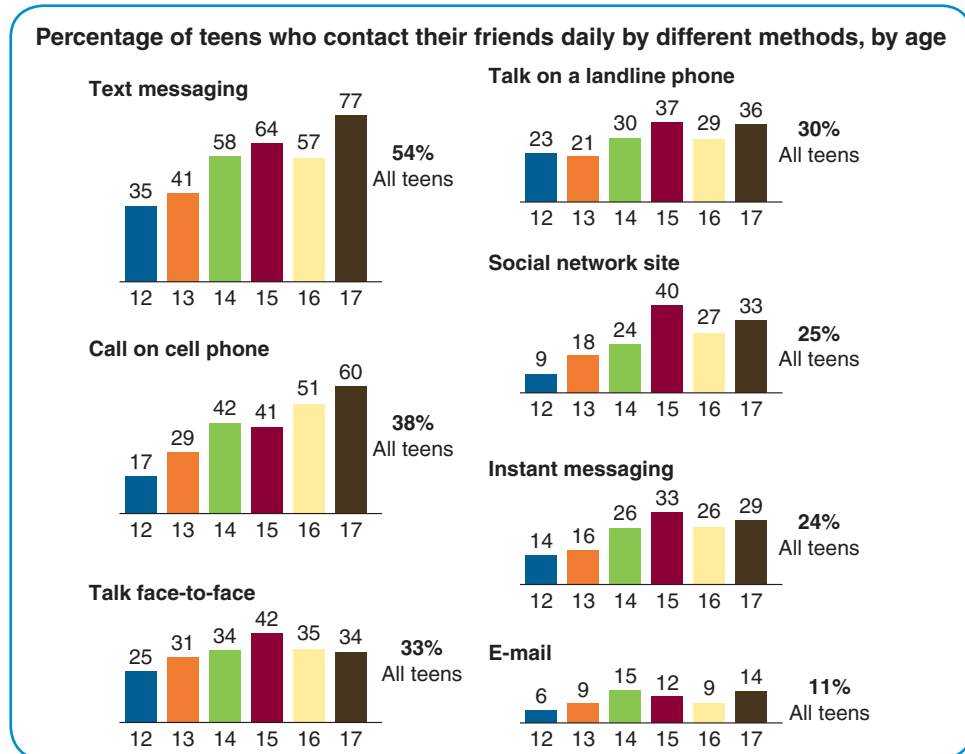
1. Communication is normally intentional.

False. Communication is also accidental or unintentional.

Communication:

A process involving both deliberate and accidental transfer of meaning.

Figure 1.1 Texting is Most Common Daily Communication Method for Teens



SOURCE: Based on information from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

There are many kinds of communication. We distinguish one type of communication from others based on the number of persons involved, the formality of the interaction, and the opportunity to give and receive feedback. For example, since **intrapersonal communication** occurs when you think or talk to yourself, it requires only a single communicator—you! In contrast to intrapersonal communication, **interpersonal communication** is the ongoing, ever-changing process that occurs when you interact with another person, forming a **dyad**, which is defined as two people communicating with each other. Both individuals in a dyad share the responsibility for determining the nature of a relationship by creating meaning from the interaction. Thus, anytime we communicate with another person, whether a friend, parent, coworker, or employer, we are communicating interpersonally. It is very common for communicators to use digital media to get their messages across to one another or the public by blogging, texting, tweeting, Instant messaging, e-mailing, or posting in a social networking site such as Facebook (see Figure 1.1).

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION TAKES TWO

First, let's consider the quantitative aspects of our interpersonal interactions. The fact that interpersonal communication takes two people means that it is indivisible. Without the second person, interpersonal communication is impossible. Thus, the parties to interpersonal communication are a duo: a couple, a pair, or perhaps adversaries. From an interpersonal perspective, even groups of three or more individuals are viewed as composites of dyads, effectively serving as the foundations for separate pairings and potential coalitions. Without a dyad, a relationship does not exist, and without a relationship, there is no interpersonal communication.⁴ This means that if one person withdraws from the relationship, then that relationship terminates—at least for the time being or until the connection between them is reestablished. The qualitative aspect of interpersonal communication is another story. We measure the quality of an interpersonal relationship along a continuum, with “intimate communication” at one end and “impersonal communication” at the opposite end. The more personally we interact with another person, the more “interpersonal” our relationship becomes. When we engage in interpersonal communication, our goal is to treat one another as genuine persons, not as objects, and to respond to each other as unique individuals with whom we create a distinct relational culture, not as people merely playing roles.⁵

The more personal a relationship becomes, the more interdependent the two people become, sharing thoughts and feelings with each other. Our lives become interconnected, especially when contrasted with how we relate to persons with whom we are uninvolved and to whom we don't reveal much about ourselves. We develop personal relationships because of the intrinsic rewards we derive from them; we find them emotionally, intellectually, and perhaps even spiritually fulfilling. In contrast, we have impersonal relationships usually because of the extrinsic rewards they offer, such as maintaining professional working relationships with others to help us reach our goals. Which kinds of relationships do you have more of, those that are impersonal or those that are personal in nature?

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS A LIFELONG PROJECT

The effectiveness of interpersonal relationships depends on the extent to which we practice and exhibit interpersonal skills. While we may be born communicators, we are not born with effective interpersonal skills—those we need to learn. Nor are effective skills static; the same techniques may not work for all people in all situations. The culture of each person, his or her gender, the environment, and the individual's goals will determine how that person approaches and processes interpersonal communication.



WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

True or False

2. *Interpersonal Communication always is between two people.*

True. Interpersonal communication occurs when two people form a dyad, also known as two people communicating with one another.

Intrapersonal communication:

Communication requiring only a single communicator; communication with oneself.

Interpersonal communication:

The ongoing, ever-changing process that occurs when one person interacts with another person, forming a dyad; communication occurring within a relationship.

Dyad: Two individuals interacting; a two-person relationship.

Just as every person represents a unique combination of physical, psychological, education, gender, and cultural characteristics that distinguish us from one another, each new relationship teaches us a little bit more about the nature of people and interpersonal communication. Each new relationship increases our comfort at interacting not only with those who share our characteristics but also with those whose attitudes, life experiences, and perspectives differ from ours.

TRY THIS: *Today, Who Is a Stranger?*

When you were a young child, your parents and/or caregivers probably cautioned you not to speak to strangers. However, travel opportunities and social networks such as Facebook make interacting with strangers much more commonplace, even ordinary. Answer the following questions:

1. To what extent, if any, are you more willing to interact with a stranger online than at the mall or when on a trip? Explain.
2. How does the anonymity or privacy of online relationships increase or decrease your level of personal comfort?
3. To what extent, if any, do you think parents or caregivers should restrict the time young children spend interacting online? To what extent, if any, do you think you should limit the time you spend in social networks?
4. In your opinion, which is more likely to result in a lasting interpersonal relationship—a friendship that begins online, an “old-fashioned” pen-pal type of friendship that depends on U.S. mail delivery, or a relationship that begins with both parties face-to-face? Explain your answer with reasons.

As we grow and learn, we must continually revise and update our personal theories of what works during interpersonal contacts, or our assumptions will compel us to repeat interpersonal scenarios or scripts that are doomed to fail. The effective interpersonal communicator does not take others for granted. Instead of following stereotypes, the effective interpersonal communicator is guided by knowledge and skill.

Our sense of personal identity results from and influences our interpersonal relationships. When we do it well, interpersonal communication helps us work through problems, ultimately enhancing our feelings of self-worth. When we do it poorly, however, rather than enlarging us, it limits our growth and frustrates our achievement of our unique potential.

Whether an interpersonal relationship is productive or not depends on how satisfying the relationship is and how much attention we pay to its health. Having good interpersonal skills can mean the difference between happiness and unhappiness or success and failure in multiple arenas or life contexts—home, job, school, health care settings, and society—as well as across cultures and generations. Enhanced understanding of the factors in play when two people communicate, whether in a personal or a professional relationship, increases an individual’s chances of developing **interpersonal competence**—the ability to communicate effectively.⁶ We increase communication competence by observing ourselves and others, assessing what we observe, practicing specific behaviors, and then predicting and evaluating the outcomes of our interactions, with the goal of improving our communication skills.

Interpersonal competence:

The ability to use appropriate communication to build and maintain an effective relationship.