

Three Levels of Communication

- Creating Healing in the Family System -



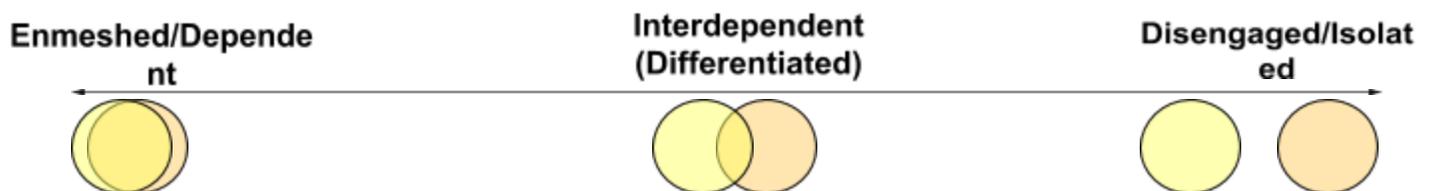
Most families seeking residential care have experienced some type of prolonged stress, heightened anxiety and significant crises. These events create distress in the lives of family members, as well as produce discord, dissension and disengagement in the family system. Resulting emotional reactions often include feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, violation, anger and despair. Individuals and families become hyper-sensitive to, and acutely aware of, present and future interactions, with the goal of protecting oneself, from further distress. Trauma has been experienced and a trauma reaction formed. Individuals and families become focused on anxious attempts to avoid reliving this trauma and/or frantic efforts to defend against and control the potential for future trauma, instead of meaningful, here-and-now oriented functioning. These frantic efforts often result in family members either becoming Enmeshed with the crisis and/or the crisis person, or Disengaged from the crisis and/or the crisis person.

When someone becomes Enmeshed (see model below), their lives are driven by reactivity to those with whom they are Enmeshed. They become dependent and struggle with maintaining autonomy in stressful circumstances. They become consumed by the toxic relationship, often resulting in some loss of ability to attend to other important responsibilities (including their own needs).

On the other side of the spectrum, a Disengaged person has isolated themselves from the crisis person or the family system dysfunction to the point of spiritual, emotional and sometimes physical absence in the relationship. They become consumed in work or service duties, distract themselves with hobbies or other relationships, or otherwise isolate themselves. Where the Enmeshed person loses the ability to act intentionally in the relationship due to loss of autonomy, anxious attachment and frantic over-involvement, the Disengaged individual loses influence due to their lack of involvement.

Both Enmeshment and Disengagement contribute to break-down in the family system, loss of healthy influence and individual dysfunction. In this manner, efforts to respond to the crisis often lead to further perpetuation of such. Many families describe this experience as an emotional rollercoaster that wreaks havoc on the family and in their personal lives.

The process of removing oneself or the family from this state of crisis reactivity requires the creation of appropriate space and boundaries in family relationships. New Haven refers to this healthy middle point on the continuum between Enmeshment and Disengagement as the achievement of Interdependence in family relationships. When a family achieves Interdependence they value independence, growth, accountability and responsibility. Individual members are driven by an internal locus of control and feel a sense of self-confidence and esteem. The family understands that it is healthy to provide and receive appropriate levels of guidance, support and structure. Family members are resilient to stress, remain flexible, and are purposeful in their relationships. A state of Interdependence is the ultimate goal New Haven encourages families to strive toward. Below is a model highlighting these relational dynamics:



One of the key ways in which family members can remove themselves from a crisis orientation into a differentiated, interdependent orientation is through the use of the Three Levels of Communication.

Three Levels of Communication: New Haven has developed a model for communicating within family relationships. This model highlights three levels of communication in which a family engages to promote emotional safety in relationships. It also assists families in determining core issues underlying a given issue and/or conflict. By focusing on the core issues, families avoid power struggles, fear based communications, and anger-based communications. They are also better able to resolve issues and conflicts through focus on the root of the matter.

Below is a model outlining the Three Levels of Communication:

Content: The words being said (inhibits emotional safety)

- The Outer Level is information only, the literal meaning of the words being said and/or the observed behaviors being displayed (what you would hear and see as an objective observer).
- Content is where all conflicts occur and where families get stuck on the rollercoaster
- Depth charges (hurtful, poignant relational attacks) and squirrels (chasing meaningless topics) serve the purpose of distracting from the real issues
- Content is rooted in the Emotions that are associated with the Core Issue, therefore Content standing alone generally does not appear logical or rational and is the least productive place of intervention.
- Instinct will often get us stuck on Content Level Communication via advice giving, lecturing, and the use of logic and rational to “fix” the Content, when greater benefits will be had looking past Content to the underlying Emotions and the Core Issues.

Emotion: What is the emotion or the feeling? What is really being said?

- Family members overlook depth charges and squirrels to focus on Emotion
- Focus on Emotion encourages de-escalation, understanding and connection, emotional safety, and empathy
- You may have to identify the Emotions several times (Consistent Validation)
- The Emotion is driven by the Core Issue, and helps you get closer to the true concern

Core Issue: Belief about self (hidden and protected)

- Core Issues drive our Emotions, which drive the Content of our lives.
- Look for the theme that continues to arise throughout the course of the conversation
- Core issues are generally rooted in beliefs about self (e.g. feeling worthless or unlovable)

Student Example

Content: “Why don’t you trust me?! You NEVER trust me! You’re ruining my life!”

Emotion: Unworthy, incapable, angry, hurt, scared, hopeless, frantic.

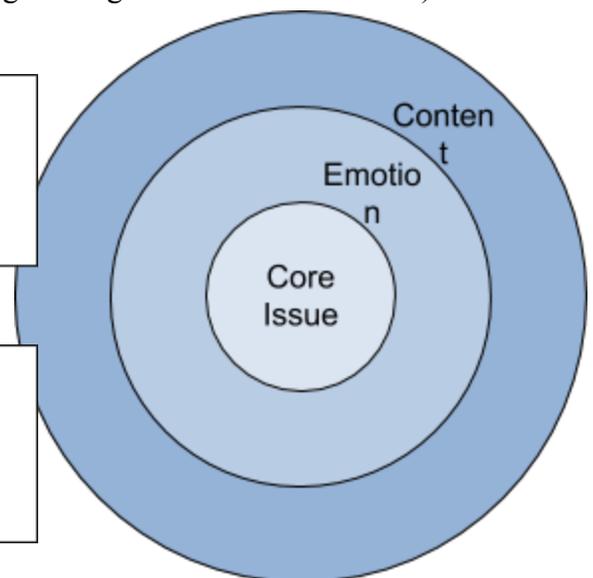
Core Issue: I am a screw-up – I am not worthy or loveable.

Parent Example

Content: “You WILL obey me and be home on time. I am sick of you ruining this family!”

Emotion: Frustrated, angry, hurt, scared, frantic.

Core Issue: I am a failure – I am a bad parent



Using Three Levels of Communication requires practice and patience. It may feel awkward at first, but with time it will feel more natural and become integrated into your personal communication style.

Core Meaning:

Core Meaning is another principle that is helpful in negating destructive, reactive interactions, while encouraging relational healing and nurture. Core Meaning is the realization of one's *innate* and *limitless* Value, Worth, Purpose and Aptitude. Core Meaning positively transforms the previously held Core Issue by converting one's negative beliefs about self into something that is healthy and that positively promotes their existence. This helps decrease the feeling of PTSD- the painful left over from the traumatic journey that brought the family to New Haven. As one begins to transform Core Issue into Core Meaning, they become free to connect with the positive about themselves. They gain a more optimistic world view. They better appreciate and strengthen their Interdependent relationships. Trepidation in family relations diminishes. They become increasingly productive in navigating life's journey.

A goal for each individual and family at New Haven is to seek to live with Core Meanings. Interdependent family relationships are an effective and fulfilling avenue through which to strengthen Core Meaning. Below is an example of how Interdependent relationships can be used to nurture Core Meaning through use of the Three Levels of Communication Model:

Core Meaning: Family members are informed of Core Issues and intentional in working from the framework of Core Meanings. All verbal and behavioral displays are understood as meaningful communication. The Core Meaning (innate value and worth) of each family member is understood and appreciated independent of Core Issues. Family members become effective and efficient at supporting one another toward positive change.

Emotion: Due to increased affiliation with Core Meanings, and the consequential healthy Content of the verbal exchange, emotional safety is achieved. In this state, a healthy range of Emotions can be felt and exhibited, including: sadness, anger, and fear about appropriate issues, along with happiness, peace, and joy. This healthy and balanced freedom of emotional expression facilitates greater depth of communication, understanding, validation and connection.

Content: The Content level of communication focuses on "win-win" oriented, intentional communication founded upon Core Meaning. From this perspective, family members are able to understand and connect with each other's actions in-context of their Emotional experience and Core concerns, versus the overuse of logic and rationale to problem solve byproducts of the Core Issue without ever actually addressing the Core Issue.

Student Example

Content: "I would really like to go out tonight – what is your concern?" (Interdependent)

Emotion: Empathy for parent concern, empowered, valued, in-control, responsible, validated

Core Meaning: I am capable, loved and respected

Parent Example

Content: "Let's discuss you going out and curfew and figure out a viable plan". (Win-Win orientation)

Emotion: Empathy for child concern, empowered, valued, confident, safe, in-control, validated

Core Meaning: I am competent, loved and respected