Objectives

1. Define, compare, and contrast self-concept and self-esteem.
2. Identify factors that shape the development of your self-concept.
3. List and describe strategies for improving your self-esteem.
4. Describe how your self-concept affects your relationships with others.
5. Identify the effects of your communication style on your relationships with others.

Outline

• Self-Concept: Who You Think You Are
• Self-Esteem: Your Self-Worth
• Facework: Communicating Your Positive Image of Yourself to Others
• How to Improve Your Self-Esteem
• Self and Interpersonal Relationships
Philosophers suggest that there are three basic questions to which all people seek answers: (1) “Who am I?” (2) “Why am I here?” and (3) “Who are all these others?” In this chapter, we focus on these essential questions about the self. We view them as progressive. Grappling with the question of who you are and seeking to define a purpose for your life are essential to understanding others and becoming other-oriented in your interpersonal communication and relationships.

Fundamentally, all your communication starts or ends with you. When you are the communicator, you intentionally or unintentionally code your thoughts and emotions to be interpreted by another. When you receive a message, you interpret the information through your own frame of reference. Your self-image and self-worth, as well as your needs, values, beliefs, and attitudes, serve as filters for your communication with others. As you establish and develop relationships, you may become more aware of these filters and perhaps want to alter them. A close relationship often provides the impetus for change.

To understand the role that self-concept plays in interpersonal communication, we will explore the first two basic questions—“Who am I?” and “Why am I here?”—in an effort to discover the meaning of self. We will examine the multifaceted dimensions of self-concept, learn how it develops, and compare self-concept to self-esteem. Then we will move to the third basic question, “Who are all these others?” What you choose to tell and not tell others about yourself reveals important clues about who you are, what you value, and how you relate to another person.

**Self-Concept: Who You Think You Are**

You can begin your journey of self-discovery by doing the exercise in Building Your Skills: Who Are You?

How did you answer the question “Who are you?” Perhaps you listed activities in which you participate, or groups and organizations to which you belong. You may have listed some of the roles you assume, such as student, child, or parent. All these things are indeed a part of your self, the sum total of who you are. Psychologist Karen Horney defines **self** as “that central inner force, common to all human beings and yet unique in each, which is the deep source of growth.”

Your answers are also part of your **self-concept**. Your self-concept is your subjective description of who you think you are—it is filtered through your own perceptions. For example, you may have great musical talent, but you may not believe in it enough to think of yourself as a musician. You can view self-concept as the labels you consistently use to describe yourself to others.

Who you are is also reflected in the attitudes, beliefs, and values that you hold. These are learned constructs that shape your behavior and self-image. An **attitude** is a learned predisposition to respond to a person, object, or idea in a favorable or unfavorable way. Attitudes reflect what you like and what you don’t like. If you like school, butter pecan ice cream, and your brother, you hold positive attitudes toward these things. You were not born with a fondness for butter pecan ice cream; you learned to like it, just as some people learn to enjoy the taste of snails, raw fish, or pureed turnips.

**Beliefs** are the way in which you structure your understanding of reality—what is true and what is false for you. Most of your beliefs are based on previous experience.

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**People tell themselves stories and then pour their lives into the stories they tell.**

*Anonymous*
You believe that the sun will rise in the morning and that you will get burned if you put your hand on a hot stove.

How are attitudes and beliefs related? They often function quite independently of each other. You may have a favorable attitude toward something and still believe negative things about it. You may believe, for example, that your school football team will not win the national championship this year, although you may be a big fan. Or you may believe that God exists, yet not always like what you think God does or does not do. Beliefs have to do with what is true or not true, whereas attitudes reflect likes and dislikes.

**Values** are enduring concepts of good and bad, right and wrong. Your values are more resistant to change than either your attitudes or your beliefs. They are also more difficult for most people to identify. Values are so central to who you are that it is difficult to isolate them. For example, when you go to the supermarket, you may spend a few minutes deciding whether to buy regular or cream-style corn, but you probably do not spend much time deciding whether you will steal the corn or pay for it. Our values are instilled in us by our earliest interpersonal relationships; for almost all of us, our parents shape our values.

The model in Figure 2.1 illustrates that values are central to our behavior and concept of self and that what we believe to be true or false stems from our values; that’s why values are in the center of the model. Attitudes are at the outer edge of the circle because they are the most likely to change. You may like your coworker today...
but not tomorrow, even though you believe the person will come to work every day and you still value the concept of friendship. Beliefs are between attitudes and values in the model because they are more likely to change than our core values but don’t change as much as our attitudes (likes and dislikes).

Are You Conscious of Who You Are?

Do you know what you’re doing right now? “Of course,” you may think, “I’m reading this textbook.” But are you really aware of all of the fleeting thoughts bouncing in your head, whether you’re truly happy or sad, or even whether you may be twiddling a pencil, jiggling your leg, or in need of a snack? To be aware of who you are and what you may be thinking about is a more involved process than you may think. To be self-aware is to be mindful. Mindfulness is the ability to consciously think about what you are doing and experiencing, rather than responding out of habit or intuition. If you’ve ever talked on the phone while driving (something illegal in many states), you may not have been mindful of, or consciously thinking about, where you were driving. Researchers have described three ways of being self-aware, or conscious of who you are and what you are doing: subjective self-awareness, objective self-awareness, and symbolic self-awareness.

Subjective Self-Awareness. Subjective self-awareness is the ability that people have to differentiate themselves from their environment. You are a separate being apart from your surroundings. It is so basic an awareness that it may even seem not worth talking about. You know, for example, that you’re not physically attached to the chair you may be sitting in. You are a separate entity from all that is around you.

Objective Self-Awareness. Objective self-awareness is the ability to be the object of our own thoughts and attention. You have the ability to think about your own thoughts as you are thinking about them. (Some research suggests that some primates also have this ability.) Not only are you aware that you’re separate from your environment (subjective self-awareness), but you can also ponder the distinct thoughts you are thinking. Of course, objective self-awareness, like subjective self-awareness, can be “turned on” and “turned off.” Sometimes you are aware of what you are thinking, sometimes you’re unaware of what you are thinking or on what you are focusing.

Symbolic Self-Awareness. Symbolic self-awareness, unique to humans, is our ability not only to think about ourselves but to use language (symbols) to represent ourselves to others. For example, you have the ability to think about how to make a good impression on others. In an effort to make a positive impression on someone, you may say, “Good evening, Mrs. Cleaver. You look nice this evening” rather than just saying, “Hi ya.” You make conscious attempts to use symbols to influence the way you want to be perceived by others.

A four-stage model of how aware or unaware we are of what we are doing at any given moment has been attributed to psychologist Abraham Maslow. This framework has also been used to explain how individuals develop communication skills.

Stage 1: Unconscious incompetence. You are unaware of your own incompetence. You don’t know what you don’t know. For example, at one point in your life you didn’t know how to ride a bicycle and you didn’t even realize that you were missing this skill. You were unconsciously incompetent about bicycle-riding skills.

Mindfulness. The ability to consciously think about what you are doing and experiencing.

Subjective self-awareness. Ability to differentiate the self from the social and physical environment.

Objective self-awareness. Ability to be the object of one’s own thoughts and attention—to be aware of one’s state of mind and that one is thinking.

Symbolic self-awareness. Uniquely human ability to think about oneself and use language (symbols) to represent oneself to others.
Stage 2: Conscious incompetence. At this level, you become aware or conscious that you are not competent: You know what you don’t know. Continuing our example, at some point you realized that others could ride a bike and you could not. You became conscious of your incompetence with regard to bicycle-riding.

Stage 3: Conscious competence. You are aware that you know something, but applying it has not yet become a habit. When you first learned to ride a bike, if you’re like most people, you had to concentrate on keeping your balance and focus on riding forward without falling over.

Stage 4: Unconscious competence. At this level, your skills become second nature to you. Now you don’t have to mentally review how to ride a bike every time you hop on one. You are unconsciously competent of how to ride a bicycle; you just get on and automatically start pedaling. The same could be said about tying your shoes; you don’t have to think about how to tie your shoes; you just do it without thinking about each step. These same four stages explain how you learn any skill, from riding a bike to enhancing the interpersonal communication skills we discuss in this book.

One or Many Selves?

Shakespeare’s famous line “To thine own self be true” suggests that you have a single self to which you can be true. But do you have just one self? Or is there a more “real you” buried somewhere within? Most scholars conclude that each of us has a core set of behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and values that constitutes our self—the sum total of who we are. But our concept of self can and does change, depending on circumstances and influences.

In addition, our self-concept is often different from the way others see us. We almost always behave differently in public than we do in private. Sociologist Erving Goffman suggests that, like actors and actresses, we have “on-stage” behaviors when others are watching and “backstage” behaviors when they are not. Goffman writes that “often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows.”

Perhaps the most enduring and widely accepted framework for describing who we are was developed by the philosopher William James. He identified three classic components of the self: the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. Perhaps you’ve heard the statement “You are what you eat.” The concept of the material self goes a step further by suggesting that “You are what you have.” The material self is a total of all the tangible things you own: your body, your possessions, your home. As you examine your list of responses to the question “Who are you?” note whether any of your statements refer to one of your physical attributes or something you own.

One element of the material self gets considerable attention in this culture: the body. Do you like the way you look? Most of us, if we’re honest, would like to change something about our appearance. When there is a discrepancy between our desired material self and our self-concept, we may respond to eliminate the discrepancy. We may try to lose weight, develop our muscles, or acquire more hair. The
multibillion-dollar diet industry is just one of many that profit from our collective desire to change our appearance.

The Social Self. Look at your “Who are you?” list once more. How many of your responses relate to your social self, the part of you that interacts with others? William James believed that you have many social selves—that, depending on the friend, family member, colleague, or acquaintance with whom you are interacting, you change the way you are. A person has, said James, as many social selves as there are people who recognize him or her. For example, when you talk to your best friend, you are willing to “let down your hair” and reveal more thoughts and feelings than you would in a conversation with your communication professor, or even your parents. Each relationship that you have with another person is unique because you bring to it a unique social self.

The Spiritual Self. Your spiritual self consists of all your thoughts and introspections about your values and moral standards. It does not depend on what you own or with whom you talk; it is the essence of who you think you are and your feelings about yourself, apart from external evaluations. It is an amalgam of your religious beliefs and your sense of who you are in relationship to other forces in the universe. Whether you believe in intelligent design or Darwinian evolution (or both),

social self   Concept of self as reflected in social interactions with others.
spiritual self Concept of self based on thoughts and introspections about personal values, moral standards, and beliefs.

Understanding Others
Adapting to Differences

It’s clear that there are cultural differences among the world’s people, including differences in language, food preferences, housing preferences, and a host of other elements; these differences have existed as long as there have been people. Anthropologists and communication scholars who study intercultural communication, a topic we’ll discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, teach the value of adapting to cultural differences in order to understand others better. But is it possible that despite their clear differences, there is a universally held principle that influences the behavior of all people? The question is not a new one. Scholars, theologians, and many others have debated for millennia whether there are any universal values that inform all human societies.

The importance of being other-oriented rather than self-absorbed is not a new idea. Most world religions emphasize some version of the same spiritual principle, known in Christianity as the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. There is convincing evidence that this rule has been the foundation of most ethical codes throughout the world. The following principles underlying various religious traditions emphasize the universal importance accorded to being other-oriented.7

Hinduism This is the sum of duty: Do nothing to others that would cause pain if done to you.
Buddhism One should seek for others the happiness one desires for one self.
Taoism Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your loss.
Confucianism Is there one principle that ought to be acted on throughout one’s whole life? Surely it is the principle of loving-kindness: do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you.
Zoroastrianism The nature alone is good that refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.
Judaism What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the entire law: all the rest is but commentary.
Islam No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.
Christianity Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Do you find this list of variations on the Golden Rule from different world religions convincing evidence that being other-oriented is a universal value? Are there other underlying values or principles, such as how the poor or the elderly should be treated, that should inform our interactions with others?
Some psychologists and sociologists have advanced theories that suggest you learn who you are through five basic means: (1) interactions with other individuals, (2) associations with groups, (3) roles you assume, (4) self-labels, and (5) your personality. Like James’s framework, this one does not cover every base in the study of self, but its constructs can provide some clues about how your own self-concept develops.

Interaction with Individuals. In 1902, Charles Horton Cooley first advanced the concept of the looking-glass self, which was his term for the notion that we form our self-concept by seeing ourselves in a kind of figurative looking glass: We learn who we are by interacting with others, much as we look into a mirror and see our reflection. Like Cooley, George Herbert Mead also believed that our sense of who we are is a consequence of our relationships with others. And Harry Stack Sullivan theorized that from birth to death our selves change primarily because of how people respond to us. One sage noted, “We are not only our brother’s keeper; we are our brother’s maker.”

The process begins at birth. Our names, one of the primary ways we identify ourselves, are given to us by someone else. During the early years of our lives, our parents are the key individuals who reflect who we are. If our parents encouraged us to play the piano, we probably play now. As we become less dependent on our parents, our friends become highly influential in shaping our attitudes, beliefs, and values. And friends continue to provide feedback on how well we perform certain tasks. This, in turn, helps us shape our sense of identity as adults—we must acknowledge our talents in math, language, or art in our own minds before we say that we are mathematicians, linguists, or artists.

Fortunately, not all feedback affects our sense of who we think we are. We are likely to incorporate the comments of others into our self-concept under three conditions.

First, we are more likely to believe another’s statement if he or she repeats something we have heard several times. If one person casually tells you that you have a good singing voice, you are not likely to launch a search for an agent and a recording contract. But if several individuals tell you on many different occasions that you have a talent for singing, you may decide to do something about it.

Second, we are more likely to value another’s statements if we perceive him or her to be credible. If we believe the individual is competent, trustworthy, and qualified to make a judgment about us, then we are more likely to believe the person’s assessment.

Third, we are likely to incorporate another’s comments into our own concept of self if the comments are consistent with other comments and our own experience. If your boss tells you that you work too slowly, but for years people have been urging...
you to slow down, then your previous experience will probably encourage you to challenge your boss’s evaluation.

Not surprisingly, your parents or early caregivers played an important role in influencing your self-concept. Researchers have found that the emotional and relational bond that you developed early on with your parents—or, to phrase this another way, how attached you felt to one or both of your parents or primary caregiver—influenced your concept of self, and that continues to influence how you relate to others. According to several researchers, you develop an attachment style based on how secure, anxious, or uncomfortable you felt in relating to one or both of your parents. Research suggests that you developed one of three different types of attachment styles: secure, anxious, or avoidant.

You have a secure attachment style if you are comfortable giving and receiving affection, experiencing intimacy, and trusting other people. If you have a secure attachment style, then you probably developed a strong, trusting, close, predictable, and positive emotional bond with your parents. Research suggests the majority of people, about 60 percent, develop a secure attachment style.

You may have developed an anxious attachment style if you received some affection but not quite enough, and so you may feel uncomfortable in some relationships; the affection you received from your parents was not always predictably present. It’s not that you received no affection from your caregivers, but you didn’t receive all that you felt you needed and therefore you may experience some anxiety about intimacy and giving and receiving affection. About 10 percent of the population develops an anxious attachment style.

Finally, you may have an avoidant attachment style if you consistently received too little nurturing. People who had this type of upbringing may feel considerable discomfort and awkwardness when expressing or receiving intimacy. Because they didn’t receive adequate affection and emotional connections as children, such people may tend to avoid relational intimacy with others. About 25 percent of the population fits this attachment style profile.

Your concept of yourself as someone who enjoys strong emotional connections with other people, or as someone who is anxious or avoids relational intimacy, is thus influenced by the degree of attachment you felt during your formative years. Obviously, you should neither blame nor congratulate your parents for the way you relate to people today. But research suggests that early relationship connections with our parents do influence the way we relate to others.

**Associations with Groups.** Reflect once more on your responses to the “Who are you?” question. How many responses associate you with a group? Religious groups, political groups, ethnic groups, social groups, study groups, and occupational and professional groups play important roles in determining your self-concept. Some of these groups you are born into; others you choose on your own. Either way, these group associations are significant parts of your identity.

Associating with groups is especially important for people who are not part of the dominant culture. Gays and lesbians, for example, find the support provided by associating with other gays and lesbians to be beneficial to their well-being. The groups you associate with not only provide information about your identity, but also provide needed social support.

**Roles You Assume.** Look again at your answers to the “Who are you?” question. Perhaps you see words or phrases that signify a role you often assume. Father, aunt, sister, uncle, manager, salesperson, teacher, and student are labels that imply certain expectations for behavior, and they are important in shaping self-concept. Couples who live together before they marry often report that marriage alters their attachment style. A style of relating to others that develops early in life, based on the emotional bond one forms with one’s parents or primary caregiver.

**secure attachment style** The style of relating to others that is characteristic of those who are comfortable giving and receiving affection, experiencing intimacy, and trusting other people.

**anxious attachment style** The style of relating to others that is characteristic of those who experience anxiety in some intimate relationships and feel uncomfortable giving and receiving affection.

**avoidant attachment style** The style of relating to others that is characteristic of those who consistently experience discomfort and awkwardness in intimate relationships and who therefore avoid such relationships.
relationship. Before, they may have shared domestic duties such as doing dishes and laundry. But when they assume the labels of “husband” and “wife,” they slip into traditional roles. Husbands don’t do laundry. Wives don’t mow the grass. These stereotypical role expectations that they learned long ago may require extensive discussion and negotiation. Couples who report the highest satisfaction with marriage agree on their expectations regarding roles (“We agree that I’ll do laundry and you’ll mow the grass”).

One reason we assume traditional roles automatically is that our gender group asserts a powerful influence from birth on. As soon as parents know the sex of their children, many begin placing them in that gender group by following cultural rules. They paint the nursery pink for a girl, blue for a boy. Boys get catcher’s mitts, train sets, or footballs for their birthdays; girls get dolls, frilly dresses, and tea sets. These cultural conventions and expectations play a major role in shaping our self-concept and our behavior.

If you have a MySpace or Facebook page, would people who only know you online have the same impression of you if they met you in person? Would people with whom you communicate via e-mail or a blog have the same image of you if they met you in person? Electronically mediated communication (EMC) makes it easier to control what information people learn about us. Because you have more control, does your online presentation of yourself differ from your live-and-in-person presentation of self? Do you try to enhance your “face” on Facebook in ways that are different from techniques you use when communicating face to face? The ease and prevalence of EMC communication in the twenty-first century has spurred communication researchers to investigate these and other questions about how we present ourselves online.18

Communication researchers Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther wanted to know whether there are differences between face-to-face conversations and EMC conversations in the amount of information people share with others, their projection of confidence, and the overall effectiveness of communication. They found that when people communicate via e-mail, they exchange information more directly with each other and perceive themselves and others to be more “conversationally effective” because they are more direct. Perhaps people perceive their communication as more effective because they can edit and revise what they say online and have more control than when talking face to face. E-mail conversation partners also reported that they were more confident when communicating online than they were in their face-to-face encounters.19

In addition to perceiving ourselves as more effective and confident as well as sharing more personal information when communicating via e-mail, we may be less truthful about ourselves when we are online compared with face-to-face communication. Two Internet researchers found strong evidence that people are much more likely to misrepresent themselves in cyberspace than in “realspace” relationships.20 As we noted in Chapter 1, we’re most likely to lie about our age, weight, and personal appearance when communicating online.21

Researchers have also found that people report their face-to-face relationships were more serious in tone than their exclusively online relationships. And even though people made more expressions of commitment in their realspace relationships compared to their cyberspace relationships, research participants reported about the same levels of satisfaction with both types of relationships and similar potential for emotional growth in their romantic relationships, whether in realspace or cyberspace.

With our increased use of EMC, researchers have found that our sense of self is derived not only from face-to-face interactions but also from the amount, kind, and quality of relationships we develop with people online. Canadian psychologist M. Kyle Matsuba examined how our self-concept (what he labeled “ego identity”) is influenced by EMC.22 He found that the more clear college students are about their own identity (self-concept), the less they develop online relationships. Or, stated the other way around, the less clear a person is about his or her own identity the more likely he or she is to develop relationships online. (Note that this is a correlation rather than a cause-and-effect relationship.) Perhaps if we are not totally certain about who we are, we develop relationships with others online to help explore who we are. Matsuba also found a strong correlation between being a heavy user of the Internet and reporting greater feelings of loneliness. (Again, he found a correlation rather than a cause-and-effect link between Internet use and loneliness; Internet use doesn’t cause loneliness, but more people who feel lonely may use the Internet to connect with others.)

Because we can control our online persona more readily than our realspace presentation of self, we’re more confident about what we’re saying about ourselves online. The Internet, which offers the opportunity to develop many relationships with others quickly and efficiently, especially on social networking sites, can help us explore facets of ourselves and clarify our self-concept.
Although it is changing, American culture is still male-dominated. What we consider appropriate and inappropriate behavior is often different for males and for females. For example, in group and team meetings, task-oriented, male-dominated roles are valued more than relationship-building roles. Some may applaud fathers who work sixty hours a week as diligent and hard-working but criticize mothers who do the same as neglectful and selfish.

Although our culture defines certain roles as masculine or feminine, we still exercise individual choices about our gender roles. One researcher developed an inventory designed to assess whether we play traditional masculine, feminine, or androgynous roles. Because an **androgy nous role** is both masculine and feminine, such a role encompasses a greater repertoire of actions and behaviors.

**Self-Labels.** Although our self-concept is deeply affected by others, we are not blank slates for them to write on. The labels we use to describe our own attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions also play a role in shaping our self-concept.

Where do our labels come from? We interpret what we experience; we are self-reflexive. **Self-reflexiveness** is the human ability to be objectively self-aware—that is—to think about what we are doing while we are doing it. We talk to ourselves about ourselves. We are both participants and observers in all that we do. This dual role encourages us to use labels to describe who we are.

When you were younger, perhaps you dreamed of becoming an all-star basketball player. Your coach may have told you that you were a great player, but as you matured, you probably began observing yourself more critically. You scored no points. So you self-reflexively decided that you were not, deep down, a basketball player, even though others may have labeled you as “talented.” But sometimes, through this self-observation, people discover strengths that encourage them to assume new labels. One woman we know never thought of herself as “heroic” until she went through seventy-two hours of labor before giving birth!

**Your Personality.** The concept of personality is central to **psychology**, the study of how your thinking influences how you behave. According to psychologist Lester Lefton, your **personality** consists of a set of enduring internal predispositions and behavioral characteristics that describe how you react to your environment. Understanding the forces that shape your personality is central to increasing your awareness of your self-concept and how you relate to others.

Does nature or nurture play the predominant role in your personality? As we noted in Chapter 1, the **communibiological approach** to communication suggests that a major factor affecting how people communicate with others is genetic makeup. Others argue that although it’s true that communication behavior is influenced by genes, we should not forget that humans can learn to adjust and adapt.

One personality characteristic that communication researchers have spent considerable time studying is the level of comfort or discomfort individuals experience when interacting with other people. Some people just don’t like to talk with others. We may say such a person is shy. **Shyness** is the behavioral tendency not to talk with others. One study found that about 40 percent of adults reported they were shy. In public-speaking situations, we say a person has stage fright; a better term to describe this feeling is **communication apprehension**. **Communication apprehension**, according to communication experts James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond, is “the fear androgynous role Gender role that includes both masculine and feminine qualities.

**self-reflexiveness** Ability to think about what you are doing while you are doing it.

**psychology** Study of how thinking influences behavior.

**personality** Enduring internal predispositions and behavioral characteristics that describe how people react to their environment.

**communibiological approach** Perspective that suggests that genetic and biological influences play a major role in influencing communication behavior.

**shyness** Behavioral tendency not to talk or interact with other people.

**communication apprehension** Fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with other people.
Communication and Emotion

In Chapter 1, we defined an emotion as a biological, cognitive, behavioral, and subjective affective reaction to an event. Emotions are reactions to what we experience. What continues to be debated is the specific sequence of events that results in an emotional response. Are we in control of our emotions, or do our emotions control us? We present three different theories that describe the chain of events that cause us to experience emotions.

Commonsense Theory of Emotion: Emotions Happen
The commonsense approach is so named because it seems to be a description of the way many people would describe how emotions occur. The commonsense theory, shown in Figure 2.2, suggests the following order of emotional experience: (1) Something happens, (2) you have an affective (that is, an emotional) reaction to the event (you feel sad or happy), and finally, (3) you respond physiologically by blushing, experiencing an increased heart rate, or having another biological reaction to your emotion.30 Here’s an example: (1) You meet your new boss for the first time, (2) you feel nervous, and (3) your heart rate increases and you begin to perspire. This sequence is typically the way many people think about emotions occurring—emotions just happen, and we really have no choice in how we feel. But there are other theories about what causes emotions.

James-Lange Theory of Emotion: Physiological Response Determines Emotional Response
Another theory of emotion, developed by psychologists William James and Carl Lange, is called the James-Lange theory of emotion.31 Note the difference in the sequence of events in this theory in Figure 2.3: (1) Something happens, (2) you respond physiologically, and then (3) you experience emotional reaction.

willingness to communicate
General term for the likelihood that an individual will communicate with others in certain situations.

or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons.”33 One study found that up to 80 percent of the population experiences some degree of nervousness or apprehension when they speak in public.34 Another study found that about 20 percent of people are considerably anxious when they give a speech.35 What makes some people apprehensive about communicating with others? Again, we get back to the nature–nurture issue. Heredity plays an important role in whether you are going to feel nervous or anxious when communicating with someone else. But so does whether you were reinforced for talking with others as a child, as well as other experiences that are part of your culture and learning.

Your overall willingness to communicate with others is a general way of summarizing the likelihood that you will talk with others in a variety of situations. If you are unwilling to communicate with others, you will be less comfortable in a career such as sales or customer service that forces you to interact with other people.

Understanding the factors that influence your self-concept—such as your interactions with individuals and groups, the roles you assume, your self-labels, and your personality, including your overall comfort level in communicating with others—can help you understand who you are and why you interact (or don’t interact) with others. But it’s not only who you are that influences your communication; it’s also your overall sense of self-esteem or self-worth that affects how you express yourself and respond to others.
an emotion. This theory suggests that we respond physiologically before we experience an emotion. The physiological responses tell us whether or not to experience an emotion. When you meet your new boss, you begin to perspire, and your heart starts beating more rapidly; this, in turn, causes you to feel nervous.

**Appraisal Theory of Emotion: Labels Determine What Emotions Are Experienced**

Yet a third view suggests that you are more in control of your emotions than you might think. You can change the emotion you are feeling by the way you decide to label or describe your experiences to yourself. This theory is called the appraisal theory, which means we appraise and label what we feel; the labels we use to describe what we experience have a major effect on what we feel as an emotional response. Here’s the suspected sequence according to this theory: (1) Something happens, (2) you respond physiologically, (3) you decide how you will react to what is happening to you, and then (4) you experience the emotion. (See Figure 2.4.) Do you see the difference in this last approach? It suggests that you have control over how you feel, based in part on what you tell yourself about what you are experiencing.

According to the appraisal theory of emotion, you actively participate in determining what emotion you experience by labeling your experiences. For example, (1) you meet your new boss, (2) your heart rate increases and you start to perspire, (3) you tell yourself that this is an important and fear-inducing event, so (4) you feel nervous and anxious. Or you could tell yourself, “This is no big deal” and not feel nervous but enjoy your conversation with your new boss.

Although researchers continue to debate precisely how events trigger our emotions, we know that our emotional reaction to what we experience has a profound impact on how we relate to others.

**Self-Esteem: Your Self-Worth**

Your self-esteem is closely related to your self-concept. Your self-concept is a description of who you are. Your self-esteem is an evaluation of who you are. The term self-worth is often used interchangeably with self-esteem. There is evidence that your overall feeling of self-worth is related to feeling and expressing positive messages toward others as well as being supportive of other people. You feel better about yourself if you behave in ways that researchers call being prosocial, which means your behaviors benefit others. Research has also found a positive relationship between high self-esteem and happiness. And although evidence suggests that having high self-esteem doesn’t mean you’ll perform better in school, or be more likely to be a leader, there is evidence that people with high self-esteem tend to speak up more in groups and share information with others.

People derive their sense of self-worth from comparing themselves to others, a process called social comparison. Social comparison helps people measure how well they think they are doing compared to others. I’m good at playing soccer (because I beat others); I can’t cook (because others cook better than I do); I’m not good at meeting people (most people I know seem to be more comfortable interacting with others); I’m not handy (but my brothers and sisters can fix a leaky faucet). Each of these statements implies a judgment about how well or badly you can perform

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**self-worth (self-esteem)** Your evaluation of your worth or value based on your perception of such things as your skills, abilities, talents, and appearance.

**social comparison** Process of comparing yourself to others who are similar to you, to measure your worth and value.
certain tasks, with implied references to how well others perform the same tasks. A belief that you cannot fix a leaky faucet or cook like a chef may not in itself lower your self-esteem. But if there are several things you can’t do well or many important tasks that you cannot seem to master, these shortcomings may begin to color your overall sense of worth. At times we may need to be reminded that our value as a human being is not equivalent to our cooking ability, our grade-point average, or the kinds of clothes we wear. Our self-worth is more precious than money, grades, or fashion.

In the 1960s, psychologist Eric Berne developed the concept of a life position to describe people’s overall sense of their own worth and that of others. He identified four life positions: (1) “I’m OK, you’re OK,” or positive regard for self and others; (2) “I’m OK, you’re not OK,” or positive regard for self and low regard for others; (3) “I’m not OK, you’re OK,” or low self-regard and positive regard for others; and (4) “I’m not OK, you’re not OK,” or low regard for both self and others. Your life position is a driving force in your relationships with others. People in the “I’m OK, you’re OK” position have the best chance for healthy relationships because they have discovered their own talents and also recognize that others have been given talents different from their own.

Facework: Communicating Your Positive Image of Yourself to Others

Your face is important to you. It’s something you look at several times a day, whether you catch a fleeting glimpse of yourself as you pass a mirror or purposefully check to

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**life position** Feelings of regard for self and others, as reflected in one’s sense of worth and self-esteem.
make sure you are looking your best. Your face is a focal point of your self-image. The amount of money spent on plastic surgery to enhance the face is clear evidence that facial appearance is important to most people. In addition, such common expressions as “in your face” or communicating “face to face” confirm that the face is a key part of everyone’s identity. But, face can refer to more than just the eyes, nose, and mouth. Face is a person’s positive perception of himself or herself in interactions with others. A related term, facework, refers to using communication to maintain your own face (your positive perception of who you are) or to support, reinforce, or challenge someone else’s face (or self-perception).

Projecting Your Face

If you are typical, you spend considerable effort to project a positive face—a positive image of yourself to others. You are using positive facework, for example, when you announce to your parents or friends that you made the dean’s list during the recent college semester. By telling them the good news about your academic success, you’re using communication to maintain a positive image of yourself and thus reinforce your own positive self-image. To have a positive face is to be approved of and liked by others. Some researchers speculate that the concept of face originated with the ancient Chinese, but no doubt they merely gave a name to something that is a characteristic of being human.

We use preventative facework to avoid developing a negative impression of ourselves—we actively work to maintain and enhance our positive perception of ourselves. For example, if you think you may be late for a meeting, you may tell a coworker, “If I’m late it’s because there may be heavy traffic on the road during rush hour.” Even before the event you’re trying to save face. We engage in corrective facework when we “save face” by correcting what we perceive as a negative perception of us, as when we say, “Oh, I’m sorry I was late. I got stuck in heavy traffic.” To “save face” is a metaphor for instilling a positive perception of yourself in others. Sociologist Erving Goffman suggests that saving face is important for most people. The effort you expend to save face (to protect your positive image) reflects the kind of perception you want others to have of you.

What are strategies for projecting a positive face? One of the best things to do is to simply be mindful of what you do to communicate positive information about yourself. Monitor how you talk to others, and consider the needs and expectations of others (be other-oriented) as you interact with them.

Besides being aware of how you are communicating a positive self-image to others, make sure your words are consistent with your actions. If you tell your family that you’re getting good grades, but your final grades don’t correspond to your story, it’s your actions, not your words, they will believe.

Since it’s others, not just you, who will assess whether you have a positive image, by observing what others value, you can mindfully decide whether you want to conform to what others expect of you. This is always a delicate balance. If you know, for example, that your friend likes people to dress up when dining in a restaurant, you can accommodate your friend by dressing more formally than you typically do. We’re not suggesting that you should always conform to the expectations of others, only that you should be aware of their expectations so that you can make a mindful decision about whether you will meet their expectations.
Communication researchers Kathy Domenici and Stephen Littlejohn suggest that there are several things we can do to actively help others maintain a positive face. Underlying each of their prescriptions is the value of being other-oriented. For example, you can honor others by addressing them as they wish to be addressed. Some of your teachers want to be called “doctor” if they have a doctoral degree or “professor” if they hold that academic rank. Yet others may say, “Call me Steve.”

Being polite is another way of enhancing the face of others. Saying “please,” “thank you,” or “excuse me” are common courtesies that are valued in virtually every culture. Being generous and supportive are other ways you enhance the face of others. Spending time with someone who enjoys your company, offering positive and affirming messages to the person, and interacting in appropriately attentive and supportive ways also help to build face. An other-oriented communicator considers what the other person would like.

We engage in face-threatening acts when we communicate in a way that undermines or challenges someone’s positive face. We may not intend for something we say or do to threaten someone else’s face, but any interaction we have with someone has the potential to be face-threatening to them. It’s the other person, not you, who determines whether a statement or behavior is face-threatening. Being aware of how we may threaten someone’s face can help us develop greater sensitivity toward others.

Social psychologists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson suggest that people from all cultures have a universal need to be treated politely. Brown and Levinson developed a theory, called politeness theory, that suggests not only that people have a tendency to promote a positive image of themselves (a positive face) but also that people will have a positive perception of others who treat them politely and respectfully. Politeness theory makes intuitive sense. We want our image of our self to be positive. And when others are polite to us, we will have a positive perception of their face.

Although people from different cultures have varying levels of need to be treated politely, what seems clear is that everyone needs to be valued and appreciated. Offering compliments, behaving respectfully, and showing concern for others are all ways of using politeness to help others project a positive face. According to politeness theory, when we have a negative message to communicate, we make a choice regarding how much we threaten someone else’s face. The statements in the following list are arranged from most face-threatening to least face-threatening:

1. Bluntly communicating a negative message: “Your office is a mess.”
2. Delivering the negative message but also communicating a face-saving message: “Your office is a mess, but perhaps messy is the look you want.”
3. Delivering the negative message but offering a counter-explanation to help the person save face: “Your office is a mess, but that’s understandable, given how much work you do around here.”
4. Communicating the negative message but doing so “off the record” or in such an indirect way that the other person saves face: “I’m not supposed to tell you this; even though your office is a mess, the boss is impressed with how well you seem to find everything.”
5. Finally, not communicating any message that would cause someone to lose face.

When someone threatens your face (“Because you were late to the meeting, I missed picking my daughter up from school”), you have choices to make. You can
respond by defending yourself or by denying what the other person has said (“No, I wasn’t late to the meeting yesterday”), or you can offer an explanation, an excuse, or an apology (“I’m so sorry. The elevator was broken so I had to walk up the stairs”). Or, by simply saying and doing nothing you can communicate a range of responses. As researchers Dominici and Littlejohn suggest, being silent can mean (1) I’m thinking about what you said, (2) I’m ignoring what you said because it’s not worth my time or effort, or (3) I’m simply not going to respond in kind to the way you’ve treated me. The effort you expend to save face (to protect your positive image) reflects the kind of perception you want others to have of you. The more effort you expend to protect your face, the more you want others to have a positive perception of you.

How to Improve Your Self-Esteem

We have mentioned that low self-esteem can affect our own communication and interactions. In recent years, teachers, psychologists, ministers, rabbis, social workers, and even politicians have suggested that many societal problems also stem from collective feelings of low self-esteem. Feelings of low self-worth may contribute to choosing the wrong partners; to becoming dependent on drugs, alcohol, or other substances; or to experiencing problems with eating or other vital activities. So people owe it to society, as well as to themselves, to maintain or develop a healthy sense of self-esteem.

Although no simple list of tricks can easily transform low self-esteem into feelings of being valued and appreciated, you can improve how you think about yourself and interact with others. We’ll explore seven proven techniques that have helped others.

Engage in Self-Talk

Cycling champion Lance Armstrong is also a cancer survivor. When he got sick, he told a friend, “Cancer picked the wrong guy. When it looked around for a body to hang out in, it made a big mistake when it chose mine. Big mistake.” The positive self-talk reflected in his words undoubtedly helped Armstrong to overcome the challenge of cancer and go on to win the Tour de France seven times.

Intrapersonal communication is communication within yourself—self-talk. Realistic, positive self-talk can have a reassuring effect on your level of self-worth and on your interactions with others. Conversely, repeating negative messages about your lack of skill and ability can keep you from trying and achieving.

Of course, blind faith without hard work won’t succeed. Self-talk is not a substitute for effort; it can, however, keep you on track and help you ultimately to achieve your goal.

Visualize a Positive Image of Yourself

Visualization takes the notion of self-talk one step further. Besides just telling yourself that you can achieve your goal, you can actually try to “see” yourself conversing effectively with others, performing well on a project, or exhibiting some other desirable

intrapersonal communication
Communication within yourself; self-talk.

visualization Technique of imagining that you are performing a particular task in a certain way; positive visualization can enhance self-esteem.
behavior. Being able to visualize completing a goal (thinking positively rather than thinking you won’t achieve your goal) adds to your overall sense of happiness and well-being. Recent research suggests that an apprehensive public speaker can manage his or her fears not only by developing skill in public speaking, but also by visualizing positive results when speaking to an audience. The same technique can be used to boost your sense of self-worth about other tasks or skills. If, for example, you tend to get nervous when meeting people at a party, imagine yourself in a room full of people, glibly introducing yourself to others with ease. Visualizing yourself performing well can yield positive results in changing long-standing feelings of inadequacy. Of course, your visualization should be realistic and coupled with a plan to achieve your goal.

Avoid Comparing Yourself with Others

Even before we were born, we were compared with others. The latest medical technology lets us see sonograms of fetuses still in the womb, so parents may begin comparing their children with other babies before birth. For the rest of our lives, we are compared with others, and rather than celebrating our uniqueness, comparisons usually point up who is stronger, brighter, or more beautiful. Many of us have had the experience of being chosen last to play on a sports team, being passed over for promotion, or standing unchosen against the wall at a dance.

In North American culture, we may be tempted to judge our self-worth by our material possessions and personal appearance. If we know someone who has a newer car (or simply a car, if we rely on public transportation), a smaller waistline, or a higher grade point average, we may feel diminished. Comparisons such as “He has more money than I have” or “She looks better than I look” are likely to deflate our self-worth.

Rather than finding others who seemingly are better off, focus on the unique attributes that make you who you are. Avoid judging your own value by comparing yourself with others. A healthy, positive self-concept is fueled not by judgments of others, but by a genuine sense of worth that you recognize in yourself.

Reframe Appropriately

Reframing is the process of redefining events and experiences from a different point of view. Just as reframing a work of art can give the picture a whole new look, reframing events that cause you to devalue your self-worth can change your perspective. For example, if you get a report from your supervisor that says you should improve one area of your performance, instead of listening to the self-talk that says you’re bad at your job, reframe the event within a larger context: Tell yourself that one negative comment does not mean you are a hopeless employee.

Of course, not all negative experiences should be tossed off and left unexamined, because you can learn and profit from your mistakes. But it is important to remember that your worth as a human being does not depend on a single exam grade, a single response from a prospective employer, or a single play in a football game.
Develop Honest Relationships

Having at least one other person who can help you objectively and honestly reflect on your virtues and vices can be extremely beneficial in fostering a healthy, positive self-image. As we noted earlier, other people play a major role in shaping your self-concept and self-esteem. The more credible the source of information, the more likely you are to believe it. Later in the chapter, we discuss how honest relationships are developed through the process of self-disclosure. Honest, positive support can provide encouragement for a lifetime.

Let Go of the Past

Your self-concept is not fixed. It was not implanted at birth to remain constant for the rest of your life. Things change. You change. Others change. Individuals with low self-esteem may be fixating on events and experiences that happened years ago and tenaciously refusing to let go of them. Perhaps you’ve heard religious and spiritual leaders suggest that it’s important to forgive others who have hurt you in the past. There is research evidence that suggests it’s important to your own mental health and sense of well-being to let go of old wounds and forgive others. Someone once wrote, “The lightning bug is brilliant, but it hasn’t much of a mind; it blunders through existence with its headlight on behind.” Looking back at what we can’t change only reinforces a sense of helplessness. Constantly replaying negative experiences in our mind only serves to make our sense of worth more difficult to change. Becoming aware of the changes that have occurred and can occur in your life can help you develop a more realistic assessment of your value. Look past your past.

Seek Support

You provide social support when you express care and concern as well as listen and empathize with others. Perhaps you just call it “talking with a friend.” Having someone who will be socially supportive is especially important when we experience stress and anxiety or are faced with a vexing personal problem. Social support from a friend or family member can be helpful, but some of your self-image problems may be so ingrained that you need professional help. A trained counselor, clergy member, or therapist can help you sort through them. The technique of having a trained person listen as you verbalize your fears, hopes, and concerns is called talk therapy. You talk, and a skilled listener helps you sort out your feelings and problems. There is power in being able to put your thoughts, especially your negative thoughts and emotions, into words. By saying things out loud to an open, honest, empathic listener, we gain insight and can sometimes figure out why we experience the hurts and difficulties that we do. If you are not sure to whom to turn for a referral, you can start with your school counseling services. Or, if you are near a medical-school teaching hospital, you can contact the counseling or psychotherapy office there for a referral.

Because you have spent your whole lifetime developing your self-esteem, it is not easy to make big changes. But talking through problems can make a difference. As communication researchers Frank E. X. Dance and Carl Larson see it, “Speech communication empowers each of us to share in the development of our own self-concept and the fulfillment of that self-concept.”

social support Expression of empathy and concern for others that is communicated while listening to them and offering positive and encouraging words.

talk therapy Technique in which a person describes his or her problems and concerns to a skilled listener in order to better understand the emotions and issues that are creating the problems.
Self and Interpersonal Relationships

Your self-concept and self-esteem filter every interaction with others. They determine how you approach, respond to, and interpret messages. Specifically, your self-concept and self-esteem affect your ability to be sensitive to others, your self-fulfilling prophecies, your interpretation of messages, your own social needs, and your typical communication style.

Self and Interaction with Others

Your image of yourself and your sense of self-worth directly affect how you interact with others. Who you think you are affects how you communicate with other people.

We defined human communication as the way we make sense of the world and share that sense with others by creating meaning through verbal and nonverbal messages. A theory called symbolic interaction theory is based on the assumption that we make sense of the world based on our interactions with others. We interpret what a word or symbol means based, in part, on how other people react to our use of that word or symbol. We learn, for example, that certain four-letter words have power because we see people react when they hear the words. Even our own understanding of who we think we are is influenced by who others tell us we are. For example, you don’t think you’re a good dancer, but after several of your friends tell you that you have dazzling dance moves, you start believing that you do have dancing talent. Central to understanding ourselves is understanding the importance of other people in shaping our self-understanding. Symbolic interaction theory has had a major influence on communication theory because of the pervasive way our communication with others influences our very sense of who we are.

George Herbert Mead is credited with the development of symbolic interaction theory, although Mead did not write extensively about his theory. One of Mead’s students, Herbert Blumer, actually coined the term symbolic interaction to describe the...
process through which our interactions with others influence our thoughts about others, our life experiences, and ourselves. Mead believed that we cannot have a concept of our own self-identity without interactions with other people.

Because the influence of others on your life is so far-reaching, it’s sometimes hard to be consciously aware of how other people shape your thoughts. One of the ways to be more mindful of the influence of others is to become increasingly other-oriented—sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others—which is essential for developing quality relationships with others. Becoming other-oriented involves recognizing that your concept of self (who you think you are) is different from how others perceive you—even though it’s influenced by others, as suggested by symbolic interaction theory. Mead suggests that we come to think of ourselves both as “I,” based on our own perception of ourselves, and as “me,” based on the collective responses we receive and interpret from others. Being aware of how your concept of self (“I”) differs from the perceptions others have of you (“me”) is an important first step in developing an other-orientation.

Although it may seem complicated, it’s really quite simple: You affect others and others affect you. Your ability to predict how others will respond to you is based on your skill in understanding how your sense of the world is similar to and different from theirs. To enhance your skill in understanding this process, you need to know yourself well. But understanding yourself is only half the process; you also need to be other-oriented. One of the best ways to improve your ability to be other-oriented is to notice how others respond when you act on the predictions and assumptions you have made about them. If you assume that your friend, who is out of work and struggling to make ends meet, will like it if you pick up the check for lunch, and she offers an appreciative “Thank you so much,” you have received confirmation that your generosity was appreciated and that your hunch about how your friend would react to your gesture was accurate.

Self and Your Future

What people believe about themselves often comes true because they expect it to come true. Their expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think you will fail the math quiz because you have labeled yourself inept at math, then you must overcome not only your math deficiency, but also your low expectations of yourself. The theme of George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion is “If you treat a girl like a flower girl, that’s all she will ever be. If you treat her like a princess, she may be one.” Research suggests that you can create your own obstacles to achieving your goals by being too critical of yourself.55 Or you can increase your chances for success by having a more positive mindset.56 Your attitudes, beliefs, and general expectations about your performance have a powerful and profound effect on your behavior.

The medical profession is learning the power that attitudes and expectations have for healing. Physician Howard Brody’s research suggests that in many instances, just giving patients a placebo—a pill with no medicine in it—or telling patients that they have been operated on when they haven’t had an operation can yield positive medical results. In his book The Placebo Response, Brody tells of a woman with debilitating Parkinson’s disease who made a miraculous recovery; her only treatment was the doctors’ telling her that they had completed a medical procedure.57 They hadn’t. Yet before the “treatment,” she could barely walk; now she can easily pace around the room. There is a clear link, suggests Dr. Brody, between mental state and physical health. Patients who believe they will improve are more likely to improve.
Self and Interpretation of Messages

Although it may have been many years since you’ve read A. A. Milne’s classic children’s stories about Winnie-the-Pooh, you probably remember Eeyore, Winnie-the-Pooh’s donkey friend. Eeyore lives in the gloomiest part of the Hundred Acre Wood and has a self-image to match. In one story, all the animals congregate on a stormy night to check on Eeyore:

. . . they all came to the part of the forest known as Eeyore’s gloomy place. On this stormy night it was terribly gloomy indeed—or it would have been were it not for Christopher Robin. He was there with a big umbrella.

“I’ve invited Eeyore to come and stay with me until the storm is over,” said Christopher Robin.

“If it ever is,” said Eeyore, “which doesn’t seem likely. Not that anybody asked me, you understand. But then, they hardly ever do.”

Perhaps you know or have known an Eeyore—someone whose low self-esteem colors how he or she interprets messages and interacts with others. According to research, such people are more likely to

- Be more sensitive to criticism and negative feedback from others.
- Be more critical of others.
- Believe they are not popular or respected by others.
- Expect to be rejected by others.
- Prefer not to be observed while performing.
- Feel threatened by people who they feel are superior.
- Expect to lose when competing with others.
- Be overly responsive to praise and compliments.
- Evaluate their overall behavior as inferior to that of others.

Your image of yourself and your sense of self-worth in part determine whether your expectations are fulfilled, but that sense of self-worth is shaped to a great degree by your interactions with others.
The Pooh stories offer an antidote to Eeyore’s gloom in the character of the optimistic Tigger, who assumes that everyone shares his exuberance for life:

. . . when Owl reached Piglet’s house, Tigger was there. He was bouncing on his tail, as Tiggers do, and shouting to Piglet. “Come on,” he cried. “You can do it! It’s fun!”

If, like Tigger, your sense of self-worth is high, research suggests you will

- Have higher expectations for solving problems.
- Think more highly of others.
- Be more likely to accept praise and accolades from others without feeling embarrassed.
- Be more comfortable having others observe you when you perform.
- Be more likely to admit you have both strengths and weaknesses.
- Prefer to interact with others who view themselves as highly competent.
- Expect other people to accept you for who you are.
- Be more likely to seek opportunities to improve skills that need improving.
- Evaluate your overall behavior more positively than would people with lower self-esteem.

Self and Disclosure to Others

When we interact with others, we reveal information about ourselves—we self-disclose. Self-disclosure occurs when we purposefully provide information to others about ourselves that they would not learn if we did not tell them. Self-disclosure ranges from revealing innocuous information about yourself, such as where you were born, to admitting your deepest fears and most private fantasies. Disclosing personal information not only provides a basis for another person to understand you better, it also conveys your level of trust and acceptance of the other person. Because others self-disclose, you are able to learn information about them and others.

Self and Interpersonal Needs

According to social psychologist Will Schutz, our concept of who we are, coupled with our need to interact with others, profoundly influences how we communicate with others. Schutz identifies three primary social needs that affect the degree of communication we have with others: the need for inclusion, the need for control, and the need for affection.

Inclusion. Each of us has a need for inclusion—the need to be included in the activities of others and to experience human contact and fellowship. We need to be invited to join others, and perhaps we need to invite others to join us. Of course, the level and intensity of this need differ from person to person, but even loners desire some social contact. Our need to include others and be included in activities may stem, in part, from our concept of ourselves as either a “party person” or a loner.

Control. We also have a need for control: We need some degree of influence over the relationships we establish with others. We may also have a need to be controlled because we desire some level of stability and comfort in our interactions with others.

Affection. Finally, we each have a need for affection. We need to give and receive love, support, warmth, and intimacy, although the amounts we need vary enormously from person to person. The greater our needs for inclusion, control, and affection, the more likely it is that we will actively seek others as friends and initiate communication with them.

need for inclusion Interpersonal need to be included and to include others in social activities.
need for control Interpersonal need for some degree of influence in our relationships, as well as the need to be controlled.
need for affection Interpersonal need to give and receive love, support, warmth, and intimacy.
self-disclosure Purposefully providing information about yourself to others that they would not learn if you did not tell them.
deepen your interpersonal relationships with them. We introduce the concept of self-disclosure in this chapter because it’s an important element in helping us understand ourselves. Because self-disclosure is the primary way we establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, we’ll discuss self-disclosure in considerable detail in Chapter 9.

In order to disclose personal information to others, you must first be aware of who you are. Your self-awareness is your understanding of who you are. In addition to just thinking about who you are, asking others for information about yourself and then listening to what they tell you can enhance your self-awareness. A variety of personality tests, such as the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, may give you additional insight into your interests, style, and ways of relating to others. Most colleges and universities have a career services office where you can take vocational aptitude tests to help you identify careers that fit who you are.

The Johari Window model nicely summarizes how your awareness of who you are is influenced by your own level of disclosure, as well as by how much information others share about you. (The name “Johari Window” sounds somewhat mystical and exotic, but it is simply a combination of the first names of the creators of the model, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham.) As Figure 2.5 shows, the model looks like a set of windows, and the windows represent your self. This self includes everything about you, including things even you don’t yet see or realize. One axis is divided into what you have come to know about yourself and what you don’t yet know about who you are. The other axis represents what someone else may know about you and not know about you. The intersection of these categories creates four windows, or quadrants.

**Open: Known to Self and Known to Others.** Quadrant 1 is an open area. The open area contains information that others know about you and that you are also aware of—such as your age, your occupation, and other things you might mention about others share about you with you. The name “Johari Window” sounds somewhat mystical and exotic, but it is simply a combination of the first names of the creators of the model, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. As Figure 2.5 shows, the model looks like a set of windows, and the windows represent your self. This self includes everything about you, including things even you don’t yet see or realize. One axis is divided into what you have come to know about yourself and what you don’t yet know about who you are. The other axis represents what someone else may know about you and not know about you. The intersection of these categories creates four windows, or quadrants.

**Blind: Not Known to Self but Known to Others.** Quadrant 2 is a blind area. This window contains information that other people know about you, but that you do not know. Perhaps when you were in grade school, as a joke someone put a sign on your back that said, “Kick me.” Everyone was aware of the sign but you. The blind window represents much the same situation. For example, you may see yourself as generous, but others may see you as a tightwad. As you learn how others see you, the blind window gets smaller. Generally, the more accurately you know yourself and perceive how others see you, the better your chances to establish open and honest relationships with others.

**Hidden: Known to Self but Not Known to Others.** Quadrant 3 is a hidden area. This area contains information that you know about yourself, but that others do not know about you. You can probably think of many facts, thoughts, feelings, and fantasies that you would not want anyone else to know. They may be feelings
you have about another person or something you’ve done privately in the past that you’d be embarrassed to share with others. The point here is not to suggest you should share all information in the hidden area with others. It is useful to know, however, that part of who you are is known by some people, but remains hidden from others.

**Unknown: Not Known to Self or Others.** Quadrant 4 is an unknown area. This area contains information that is unknown to both you and others. These are things you do not know about yourself yet. Perhaps you do not know how you will react under certain stressful situations. Maybe you are not sure what stand you will take on a certain issue next year or even next week. Other people may also not be aware of how you would respond or behave under certain conditions. Your personal potential, your untapped physical and mental resources, are unknown. You can assume that this area exists, because eventually some (though not necessarily all) of these things will become known to you, to others, or to both you and others. Because you can never know yourself completely, the unknown quadrant will always exist; you can only guess at its current size, because the information it contains is unavailable to you.

We can draw Johari Windows to represent each of our relationships; see Figure 2.6. Part A shows a new or restricted relationship for someone who knows himself or herself very well. The open and blind quadrants are small, but the unknown quadrant is also small. Part B shows a very intimate relationship, in which both individuals are open and disclosing.

**Self and Communication Social Style**

Over time we develop general patterns or styles of relating to others based on several factors, including our personality, self-concept, self-esteem, and what we choose to disclose to others. Our general style of relating to others is called our communication social style; it is an identifiable way of habitually communicating with others. The concept of communication social styles originates in the work of Carl Jung who, in his book *Psychological Types*, described people according to four types: thinkers, feelers, intuiters, and sensors.65 (The Myers-Briggs personality inventory, which in part assesses ways of relating to others, is based on Jung’s types.) Communication researchers built on Jung’s pioneering work to identify communication social styles.
The communication social style we develop helps others interpret our messages and predict how we will behave. As they get to know us, other people begin to expect us to communicate in a certain way, based on previous associations with us.66

According to communication researchers William Snavely and John McNeill, the notion of communication social style is based on four underlying assumptions about human behavior:

1. We develop consistent communication behavior patterns over time.
2. We form impressions of others based on their verbal and nonverbal behavior.
3. We interact with others based on our perceptions of them.
4. We develop our perceptions of others based primarily on two dimensions: assertiveness and responsiveness.67

A variety of different communication social style models have been developed during the past 30 years. Regardless of the specific model (some models describe four styles, others include just two), there is general agreement on the two fundamental dimensions of assertiveness (which focuses on accomplishing a task) and responsiveness (which emphasizes concern for relationships) as anchoring elements in determining a person’s social style.68

**Assertiveness** is the tendency to accomplish a task by making requests, asking for information, and generally looking out for one’s own rights and best interests. An assertive style is sometimes called a “masculine” style. By masculine, we don’t mean that only males can be assertive, but that in many cultures, males are expected to be assertive. You are assertive when you seek information if you are confused or direct others to help you get what you need.

**Responsiveness** is the tendency to focus on the dynamics of relationships with others by being sensitive to their needs. Being other-oriented and sympathetic to others’ feelings and placing the feelings of others above one’s own feelings.

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**Building Your Skills**

**What’s Your Communication Social Style?**

**Directions:** The following questionnaire lists 20 personality characteristics. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of these characteristics applies to you, as you normally communicate with others, by marking whether you (5) strongly agree that it applies, (4) agree that it applies, (3) are undecided, (2) disagree that it applies, or (1) strongly disagree that it applies. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly; record your first impression.

- 1. helpful
- 2. defends own beliefs
- 3. independent
- 4. responsive to others
- 5. forceful
- 6. has strong personality
- 7. sympathetic
- 8. compassionate
- 9. assertive
- 10. sensitive to the needs of others
- 11. dominant
- 12. sincere
- 13. gentle
- 14. willing to take a stand
- 15. warm
- 16. tender
- 17. friendly
- 18. acts as a leader
- 19. aggressive
- 20. competitive

**Scoring:** Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 18, 19, and 20 measure assertiveness. Add the scores on these items to get your assertiveness score. Items 1, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, and 17 measure responsiveness. Add the scores on these items to get your responsiveness score. Scores range from 50 to 10. The higher your scores, the higher your orientation toward assertiveness and responsiveness.

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feelings of others, and placing others’ feelings above your own are examples of being responsive. Researchers sometimes label responsiveness a “feminine” quality. Again, this does not mean that only women are or should be responsive, only that many cultures stereotype being responsive as a traditional and expected behavior of females.

To assess your style on the assertiveness and responsiveness dimensions, take the sociocommunicative orientation test by James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond in the Building Your Skills box. You may discover that you test higher on one dimension than on others. It’s also possible to be high on both or low on both. Assertiveness and responsiveness are two different dimensions; you need not have just one or the other.

Another way to identify your communication social style is to ask your friends, family members, and colleagues who know you best to help you assess your style. They are in the best position to determine your overall behavior that contributes to their perceptions of you as assertive or nonassertive, responsive or nonresponsive.

It’s all well and good to understand your own communication social style and know how your self-concept, self-esteem, personality, and even your biology contribute to a predominant way of interacting with others. But as we’ve noted before: It’s not always about you. At the heart of interpersonal communication is relating to others. Understanding your self in relationship to the style of other people can help you make mindful decisions about how to relate to them. But let us be clear: We’re not talking about how to manipulate other people—we’re talking about how to ethically and sensitively enhance the quality of your communication with others.

How can you assess another person’s communication social style? Although you’re probably not going to have your friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances take a test to assess their communication style, you can look for behaviors that indicate their levels of assertiveness and responsiveness.

The longer you know someone, the more likely you are to be able to accurately identify another person’s social style. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 list a few behaviors that may indicate assertiveness or responsiveness. The tables are based on research on the

| TABLE 2.1 | Identifying Assertive Behaviors in Others a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Assertive People Tend To</th>
<th>Less Assertive People Tend To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talk more</td>
<td>• Talk less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talk faster</td>
<td>• Talk more slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talk loudly</td>
<td>• Talk softly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body</strong></td>
<td><strong>Body</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Move faster</td>
<td>• Move more slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appear more energetic</td>
<td>• Appear less energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lean forward</td>
<td>• Lean backward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TABLE 2.2 | Identifying Responsive Behaviors in Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Responsive People Tend To</th>
<th>Less Responsive People Tend To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use more pitch variation</td>
<td>• Use less pitch variation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take a brief time to respond</td>
<td>• Take a longer time to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use more vocal energy</td>
<td>• Use less vocal energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body</strong></td>
<td><strong>Body</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Show more facial animation when talking</td>
<td>• Show less facial animation when talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use more head nods</td>
<td>• Use fewer head nods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use smoother, flowing gestures</td>
<td>• Use more hesitant, nonflowing gestures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
majority population of North Americans, so there are cultural and ethnic limitations to these lists. And we certainly don’t claim that by observing these few cues, you can definitively determine someone’s communication social style. But the tables will give you some initial ideas that you can use to later refine your impressions.

Experts who study and apply communication social style research suggest that the simplest way to adapt your style to enhance communication quality is to communicate in ways that more closely match the style of the other person. Keep the following principles in mind as you consider your communication social style and the social styles of others:

- Most people have a dominant communication social style (a primary way of interacting with others) that includes the two dimensions of assertiveness and responsiveness.
- There is no single best communication social style to use in all situations—there are advantages and disadvantages to every style, and the specific circumstances should help you determine whether you should be more assertive or more responsive toward others.
- To enhance interpersonal communication, it’s useful to understand both your style and the style of the other person and then decide whether to adapt your communication social style.

**APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Self and Interpersonal Communication**

“To thine own self be true.” In this famous line from Act I, Scene iii of *Hamlet*, Polonius is providing advice to his son Laertes as Laertes prepares to travel abroad. Polonius gives Laertes a number of suggestions, and concludes with this wise fatherly advice: “This above all, to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day,/Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

In this chapter we’ve discussed the significance of your self-perception and self-esteem and how these self-perceptions affect your relationships with others. Although we’ve emphasized the importance of being other-oriented, we conclude the chapter by echoing Polonius’s advice to his son: *Be true to yourself.*

To be other-oriented doesn’t mean only behaving in people-pleasing ways in order to ingratiate yourself to them. Rather, as an other-oriented communicator, you are aware of the thoughts and feelings of others, but remain true to your own ethics and beliefs. For example, if you object to watching violent movies, and a group of your friends invites you to see a “slasher” movie, you don’t have to attend with them. Nor do you have to make a self-righteous speech about your feelings about violent movies; you simply can excuse yourself after calmly saying you don’t like those kinds of movies. You don’t have to do what others do simply to be popular. As your mother may have said when you were growing up, “If all of your friends jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?” In essence, your mother was echoing Polonius’s counsel to be true to yourself rather than blindly following the herd to be popular.

The word *credo* means belief. What’s your personal credo or set of beliefs? Being aware of your personal beliefs—whether those beliefs are about things philosophical, or spiritual, about human nature, or about the political and social issues of the day—can serve as an anchoring point for your interactions with others. Without knowing where your “home” is—your personal credo—you’ll not know how far away from “home” you travel as you make your way in the world and relate to others.

There is sometimes a tension between being true to yourself and being true to others. Consider drafting your own personal credo, your statement of core beliefs, so that you might more mindfully follow Polonius’s advice to be true to yourself as you relate to others.
Self-Concept: Who You Think You Are (pages 33–43)

Self-concept plays an important role in interpersonal communication. Understanding who you are is essential to understanding others and becoming other-oriented in your interpersonal communication and relationships. Self-concept is your subjective description of who you think you are. It is filtered through your own perceptions and is different from the way others see you. A classic framework for describing who you are identifies three components of the self: the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. Self-concept is also reflected in the attitudes, beliefs, and values you hold. You develop your self-concept and the different dimensions of self in five ways: through interactions with other individuals, association with groups, roles you assume, self-labels, and your personality.

Key Terms
Self 33
Self-concept 33
Attitude 33
Belief 33
Value 34
Mindfulness 35
Subjective self-awareness 35
Objective self-awareness 35
Symbolic self-awareness 35
Material self 36
Social self 37
Spiritual self 37
Looking-glass self 38
Attachment style 39
Secure attachment style 39
Anxious attachment style 39
Avoidant attachment style 39
Androgynous role 41
Self-reflexiveness 41
Psychology 41
Personality 41
Communibiological approach 41
Shyness 41
Communication apprehension 41
Willingness to communicate 42

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Make a list of all the groups, clubs, and organizations to which you belong. Rank them from most important to you to least important. What does your ranking tell you about these groups in reference to your self-concept? For example, which groups have you joined more from a desire to belong or for the prestige of the group than because of an interest in or passion for the group’s cause?
2. Ethics: Considering again Shakespeare’s line “To thine own self be true,” can you think of instances when you have not been true to yourself, in your actions, the role(s) you assumed, and/or your interactions with others? Did you know at the time that you were behaving in a way that was not compatible with your values? Do you think others were aware of this? Explain.

Activities
Rank the following list of values from 1 to 12 to reflect their importance to you. In a group with other students, compare your answers. Discuss how your ranking of these values influences your interactions with others.

1. Honesty
2. Justice
3. Salvation
4. Wealth
5. Comfort
6. Beauty
7. Good health
8. Equality
9. Human rights
10. Freedom
11. Peace
12. Mercy

Web Resources
http://www.queendom.com Assess your personality and other communication-related variables.

Self-Esteem (pages 43–49)

Your self-esteem is closely related to your self-concept. Your self-concept is a description of who you are, whereas your self-esteem is an evaluation of who you are. This sense of self-worth (self-esteem) is often derived from comparing yourself to others, in terms of skills, personal appearance, material possessions, or other qualities or characteristics. In a process called facework, we use communication to maintain a positive self-perception, as well as to reinforce or challenge others’ perceptions. Through various techniques such as visualization, talk therapy, and avoiding social comparisons, you can improve your self-esteem, not only in terms of how you think about yourself, but also in terms of how you interact with others.

Key Terms
Self-worth/self-esteem 43
Face-threatening acts 46
Social comparison 43
Politics theory 46
Life position 44
Intrapersonal communication 47
Face 45
Visualization 47
Facework 45
Reframing 48
Preventative facework 45
Social support 49
Corrective facework 45
Talk therapy 49

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Describe a recent event or communication exchange that made you feel better or worse about yourself. What happened that made you feel good? Or, what made you feel bad—ineffective, embarrassed, or unhappy? In general, how do your communication exchanges influence your self-esteem? Explain. How might visualization or other strategies help?
2. Do you find that you make social comparisons with others that affect your self-esteem? If so, what qualities of others most influence your own view of yourself: appearance, material possessions, skills/talent, something else? Explain.
3. How does electronically mediated communication (EMC) influence the comparisons you described in Question 3, and in turn, your self-esteem? Do Facebook profiles play a role? Do the mass media play a role in creating those comparisons?
Part One  Interpersonal Communication Foundations

4. Ethics: Many self-help books claim to provide sure-fire techniques for enhancing self-esteem and thus enrich your social life. Do you think these claims are ethical? Why or why not?

Activities

Briefly describe an upcoming situation that makes you anxious, such as working on a group project, calling a prospective employer about a job, or competing in a sporting event. What strategies are you employing to deal with your nervousness? Describe how visualization might help. Share with your classmates a positive scenario, describing the successful outcome.

Web Resources

http://www.social-anxiety.com  Go to this site to learn more about shyness and social phobias; the site also offers case studies.

Self and Interpersonal Relationships

(pages 50–58)

Your self-concept and self-esteem have a direct impact on your interactions with others—both how you respond to and interpret messages and the communications style you develop and employ. At the same time, other people have a central impact on your self-understanding. Being aware of how your concept of self (“I”) differs from the perceptions others have of you (“me”) is an important first step in becoming other-oriented. Being other-oriented is being mindful of others’ influence on you and your self-concept, as well as being sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others. This mindfulness, in turn, influences how you communicate with others. Self-disclosure, sharing information about yourself with others, is a key component of that communication and is how we establish and maintain relationships. This becomes our communication style.

Key Terms

Symbolic interaction theory  50  Self-awareness  54
Self-fulfilling prophecy  51  Johari Window model  54
Need for inclusion  53  Communication social style  55
Need for control  53  Assertiveness  56
Need for affection  53  Responsiveness  56
Self-disclosure  53

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Provide an example of a recent communication exchange with a friend, classmate, family member, or work colleague that revealed that some aspect of your perception of yourself differed from how the other person perceived you. Why do you think the perceptions differed? Did knowing the other person’s perception change your behavior and/or your own perceptions, or not? Explain.

2. Describe a situation in which your expectations of the outcome became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Was the outcome positive or negative? Did your self-esteem have an impact? Explain.

3. Have you ever shared personal information and found that what you revealed wasn’t well received or received as you intended? How did you handle the situation?

4. Ethics: Is it always best to be honest when self-disclosing? What types of self-disclosure might be inappropriate? Are there times when it would be appropriate to withhold information? Is that ethical? Explain.

5. Ethics: Carmelita would like to become better friends with Hector. She decides to disclose some personal information to Hector, hoping that this self-disclosure will increase feelings of intimacy between them. Is it ethical to self-disclose to others as a strategy to enhance intimacy in a relationship?

Activities

Create a Johari Window that includes in square 3 (“hidden,” or known to self but not to others) five or six adjectives that best describe your personality as you see it. Then ask a close friend to fill in square 2 (“blind,” or known to others but not known to self) with five or six adjectives to describe your personality. Separately, ask a classmate you’ve just met to fill in square 2 as well. Compare and contrast. Are the adjectives used by your close friend and the acquaintance you’ve just met similar or different? Is there any overlap? Now fill in square 1 (“open,” or known to self and others) with any adjectives that both you and either of the other participants chose. What does this tell you about what you disclose about yourself to others?

Go through your library of music downloads and CDs and identify a selection that best symbolizes you, based on either the lyrics or the music. Bring your selection to class to play for your classmates. Tell why this music symbolizes you. Discuss with classmates how your choice of music provides a glimpse of your attitudes and values, as well as a vehicle for self-expression.

Web Resources

http://abacon.com/commstudies/interpersonal/indisclosure.html  Want to learn more about the Johari Window? This site about self-disclosure helps explain the Johari Window and gives you an opportunity to complete an interactive activity and take a short quiz to test your understanding of the concept.

http://www.winning-solutions.com/Training/interpersonal.html  Check out this site to assess your personality type. Explore relationships between your personality and interpersonal communication.