

# Communicating about the hard stuff



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I hate it when  
I have so much  
to say but I can't  
put in words.

# OBJECTIVES:

1. To increase **confidence & comfort** in talking about your cancer/survivorship experiences with family and friends
2. To **learn** difference between a battle of messages and a learning conversation
3. To **identify** own personal strengths & challenges in communication

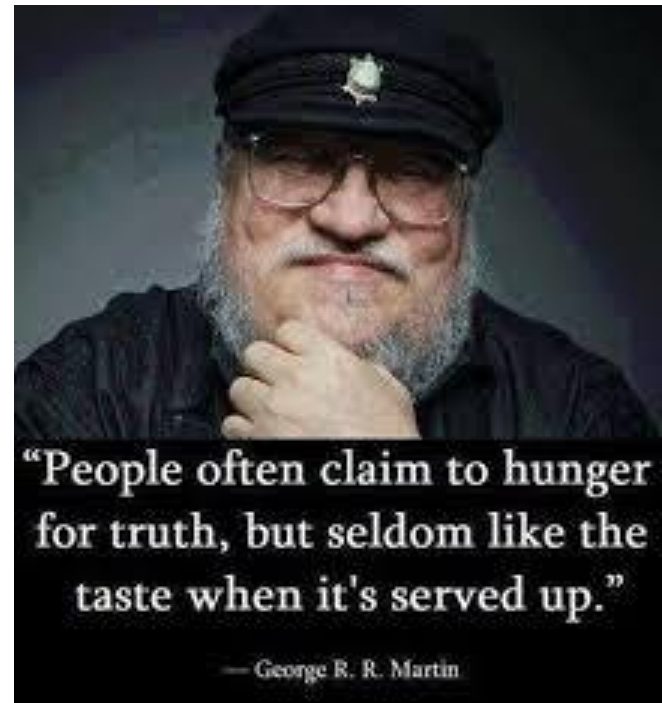
# The hard stuff: Content

- Saying “ I had cancer”
- Explaining “It is not over”
- Describing late effects or impairments
- Addressing changes in relationships
- Sharing fears about future, uncertainty
- Asking for help



# The hard stuff: Process

- Unsure how to communicate, verbally and nonverbally
- Should we be positive, or brutally honest?
- Can they handle it?
- Will it feel like I dropped a bomb?



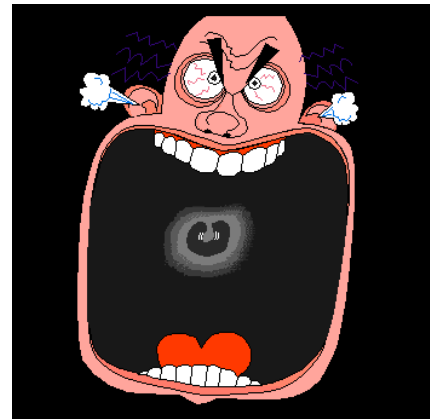
# Why is it so difficult?

- Involve **strong emotions** for you & the listener
- How we **feel about ourselves** also at stake: self-worth, competence
- Worry about **how others will see us**: embarrassed
- **Fears about future** come up: Will I make it worse?



# Troublesome emotional responses from family/friends

- Pity
- Denial
- Fear
- Anger
- Grief
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Confusion



# Two ways the conversation can go

## **A battle of messages**

- Think we know all need to know about situation
- We want the other person to come around
- “I’m right.”

## **A learning conversation**

- Realize other person has a perspective we don’t fully know
- Both points of views equally important
- Goal is to share perspectives and come to agreement



# Three parts of a difficult conversation

A helpful way to understand what is going on in a difficult conversation is to divide it into three parts:

1. The “What happened” Conversation
2. The Feelings Conversation
3. The Identity Conversation

# The “What Happened” Conversation

- This conversation also has three parts:
  1. The **Truth** of what happened
  2. The **Intentions** of the people involved
  3. Who is **to blame** for the situation

The challenge of the “What Happened” Conversation is that the situation is more complex than either person can see.

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p><b>Truth</b>  <b>Assumption:</b> I know everything about situation.  <b>Goal:</b> Persuade them I'm right.</p>	<p><b>Assumption:</b> Each of us has different information and perspectives.  <b>Goal:</b> Explore how we each understand the situation and why.</p>
<p><b>Intentions</b>  <b>Assumption:</b> I know what they intended  <b>Goal:</b> Let them know what they did was wrong</p>	<p><b>Assumption:</b> I know what I intended, &amp; the impact their actions had on me. I don't know what is in their head.  <b>Goal:</b> :Let them know impact on me, find out what they were thinking, and find out impact I am having on them.</p>
<p><b>Blame</b>  <b>Assumption:</b> It's all their/my fault.  <b>Goal:</b> One person takes responsibility</p>	<p><b>Assumption:</b> We are <i>both</i> responsible.  <b>Goal:</b> Understand how actions interact to produce this result.</p>

# The Feelings Conversation

- We need to **EXPRESS** feelings not vent them

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p><b>Assumption:</b> Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't help to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.)</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let them have it!)</p>	<p><b>Assumption:</b> Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judging, blaming, or attributing negative intention. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.</p>

# The Identity Conversation

- The challenge here is that difficult conversations usually threaten our identity and force us to understand and accept our limitations.

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p><b>Assumption:</b> I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Preserve my all-or-nothing self-image.</p>	<p><b>Assumption:</b> There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.</p>

# Prepare for the Difficult Conversation

## **Multiple Stories**

- What's my story? What's my story missing? What do I think is their story?

## **Impact/Intent**

- What are my intentions? What was impact on me? My guess about their intentions? My guess about my impact on them? Does any of this shift how I feel?

## **Contribution**

- What did I contribute to the problem? What did they contribute?

## **Feelings**

- What are my feelings? What might they be feeling?

## **Identity**

- How does this situation threaten my identity?

# Important Skills

## **Raising Issues in way that avoid battle of messages**

- Time, place, tone
- Describe situation in impartial way without blaming/judging
- State impact
- Check intentions
- Invite to problem solve
- Ask open questions

# How do I begin the conversation?

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us get along better.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?
- I think we have different perceptions about \_\_\_\_\_. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about \_\_\_\_\_. I think we may have different ideas about how to\_\_\_\_\_.



# Important Skills

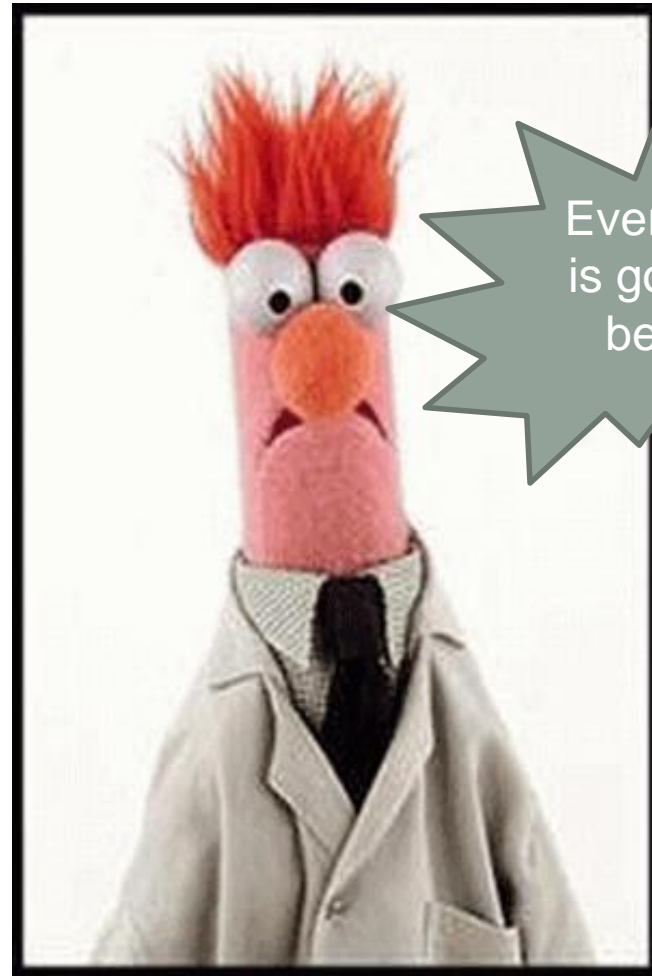
**Active Listening—allows you to communicate an open, curious, non-judging, caring mindset**

- Acknowledge their message by paraphrasing
- Acknowledge their feelings—show you understand
- Ask open questions
- Acknowledge your limitations and actions
- Apologize if appropriate
- Commit to change if appropriate

# Verbal and non verbal communication

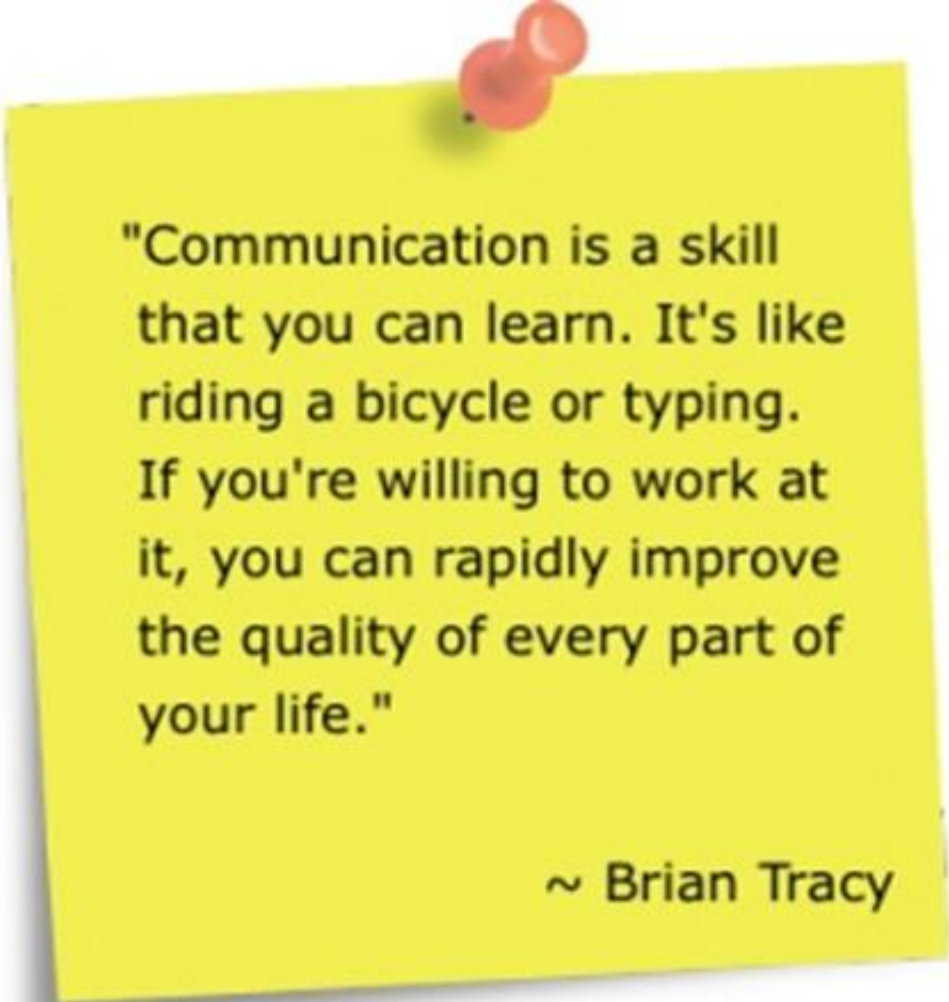
Communication research has shown that non-verbal messages tend to override verbal messages when the two are inconsistent and contradictory

(Koch 1971, McCroskey 1971)



# Important Skills: Expressing Feelings

- Being emotional ≠ Expressing emotions clearly
- Sharing feelings well and clearly requires thoughtfulness
  1. Find your feelings. Accept them. Recognize that good people can have bad feelings.
  2. Wait till not overly emotional to initiate conversation. Go through preparing for difficult conversation questions.
  3. Express the full spectrum of your feelings.
  4. Don't evaluate, just share.
  5. Say "I feel"
  6. Don't monopolize, both can have strong feelings at same time.
  7. Accept that their feelings matter too and try to understand them



"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life."

~ Brian Tracy

LET'S TALK