

# Compassionate Cyber-Communication

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Communicating with compassion on the internet (in cyberspace) is a new skill about which we are all still learning. Those who have been seeking to promote compassionate cyber-communication have offered some possibilities for being a “good listener” on the internet. Just because we don’t interact “face to face” doesn’t mean that good listening isn’t a part of interpersonal exchange. Technology is neither an impediment to nor an excuse to stop being a listener to others. The following are 7 listening skills offered in hopes to help us to continue to be good listeners for one another. Even though our speech comes through the written word accessed by a keyboard, and the only sound we often hear is the tapping sound of that keyboard as we are typing those words, there are thousands of sensitive, alive, people behind the stillness of our monitors with pulsing hearts and spirited souls. They are voices behind the typed words speaking of life to us. When we are listening to them, we are listening to life. Listening has to start with the person doing it, therefore, all of the following seven skills center on the letter “I” or some of its “sound-alikes”.

1. **It’s all about “I”.** Listening starts with me “owning my own stuff”. When we make comments or give feedback to each other, it is important to start our statements by laying claim to our own opinions, beliefs, feelings, and thoughts. Otherwise our statements become global proclamations in which we can and probably do come across the monitor to the other person as arrogant, pushy, pontificating, and judgmental.

2. **Look me in the Eye.** In face to face communication we have both the luxury and the honor of looking someone in the eye when we are dialoguing. We do not have that luxury or honor here in cyberspace. However, we all also have “inner” eyes, too.



These are the eyes that see beyond the written word on the page to the invisible person who is typing it. These are the eyes of compassion that see beyond the “seeable” tangible reality of words on a page to the human heart and mind that placed it there. When we see with our inner eyes, it becomes important to assure the other person that we are listening and interested or offer them suggestions for being better heard and understood.

3. **The “Ayes” have it.** Once again the privilege and luxury of offering a nod of understanding and a look of keen interest in a conversation is not available to us in cyberspace. It is therefore important for us when communicating by written word that we either state how we understand what is being said and that we are connecting with it or we

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state we need further clarification or explanation to help us gain that understanding and connection.

4. **There is an “I” in silence.** In music, the silence of the “rests” is equally important with the notes sounding around them. The same is true with words. They mean more coming out of us when we treat silence with equal regard. We don’t have to answer every post or every reply. We can also wait before answering. In the silence of waiting comes the quiet thoughtfulness of contemplation. In that state we are able to hone our thoughts and temper our words into a sensitive and respectful response rather than offering an impulsive and harsh reaction. Who knows, in the silence, we may discover that the other person might have a point or actually be right! Or even more potent, we may discover the ability to gain victory by “surrendering” our need to be right, in that even though we may be right, we no longer need to show it or prove it to anyone else.

5. **“I think therefore I am” not listening.** When I am thinking about what I am going to say before the other person finishes communicating with me, I am no longer listening to them. Or conversely, when I allow what others might think to control the honesty or integrity of what I am writing, I am “thinking” too much and can’t any longer listen to the cries of my heart and soul for true expression. When we are so focused on what we want to say that is when what others say becomes less important, we truly have stopped “listening to life”. Our self-centered thinking also gets in our own way when we become so focused on getting other’s approval and/or attention that we lose our integrity in the process.

6. **“I already know what you’re going to say.”** I have discovered that even if I think I already know what the other person is going to say or I feel that I’ve “heard it all before”, I need to listen anyway. I can’t begin to count the number of times when my hearing something again caused me to hear something “for the first time.” Even if we have “heard this before”, there is always something new to learn in life. ***You can never put your foot into the same river twice.*** If we shut out people’s speaking because it seems we’ve heard before, we are guaranteed to miss discovering a gem of new learning that would shine new light on our faded knowledge.

7. **“I’ve got things to do.”** In face-to-face communication, I always feel a little less respected when someone else starts doing something while I am sharing something. In the context of communication in cyberspace, it is more accurately reflected in the statement, “I’ve got my own agenda.” It shows itself from time to time as a reply that had little to do with the posted message or takes the posted message off on a tangent and leaves the poster feeling disrespected and perhaps even undervalued in regards to what they were trying to communicate.

So many times since childhood, I recall the pain I felt when I experienced my “voice” as being one to which it seemed no one listened. 🗣️👂👉👈 Some part of our sense of value as human beings does come from listening to each other. Even without the sound of voices, the face-to-face eye contact, or even the possibility of touch, we still “touch” each other with the immense power of the written word. When we approach our communications in

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cyberspace, we need to hold high in remembering and even higher in practice the truth that we are “listening to life.”

### The “Terminators” to Compassionate Cyber-Communication

Just as we must “listen to life” in our communication with others, there are actions we take that “terminate life” in communication. If we become aware and conscious of when we allow one or more of these “terminators” to end the life of our communications with others, we will be much better equipped to cease doing them. This will then increase the compassion of our cyber-communication.

The following nine actions can be viewed as “the terminators” of life-giving conversation and interaction between persons. In identifying each of them and perhaps discovering which ones we engage in most often, we can hopefully stop doing them and build new and more compassionate communication skills.

**Advising:** Often, I just want someone to listen when I am struggling through some difficult feelings or problems. Yet there are some who feel compelled to “fix” my problem by giving me all sorts of suggestions and recommendations for what I should do. I do understand the “need to fix” and have certainly done the same thing to others. Over the years, I have slowly learned not to give advice unless it is asked of me. Advice means much more to someone who really wants the help than it does to someone who hadn’t asked for it in the first place. Unsolicited advice terminates life-giving communication because it removes the sense of personal interchange between two equal persons. That sense of equality is vital to any communication between persons, vital to listening to life!

**Changing the Subject:** When someone ignores what we have just said, and goes on with another subject, it arouses within us feelings of rejection and being unvalued. In cyber-space, changing the subject occurs most often when someone has posted something and one of the repliers takes it off on a different tangent or course entirely. This has happened frequently to me as well as to others. I have learned that if I have something additional that might take the focus off of what the person posting was trying to say, I will post a new message so as not to detract in any way from their point.

**Dominating:** We all know how we feel when someone begins to dominate a conversation in a group of people. Most of us tend to either shut down or try to out-shout the one who is dominating. I am sure we have all noticed that neither one of these methods works. We have to be assertive without “out-shouting”. In cyber-space, conversation domination will often take place more as two people talking to each other within a thread, and no matter what anyone else posts in the way of a reply, their conversation dominates what is going on in the communication. Trying again to post a new post with clear instructions about what we expect in the possible replies often works better than getting into a “pissing match” in the thread of replies. Dominating also takes the form of “attention-getting” posts. These are the ones which when posted occupy the entire first page of a group instead of placing most of it in a reply. These are the ones that relentlessly post lengthy treatises about themselves or

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something interesting to them to get the attention of others. Obviously this will terminate the life of a communication and leave the one trying to get the attention even lonelier than they were previously. It certainly seems more thoughtful to use the first reply if the post will be too long. And from what I have observed and experienced, people enjoy posted messages more if the person posting them has not "tired them out" with too many posts in the group already.

**Interpreting:** Sometimes I have had the experience of someone trying to explain something I just said based on their own beliefs. If I feel the need to explain further, believe me, as you can clearly see, I am wordy enough and capable enough to offer more explanation myself. Usually such an exchange will begin with, "I think what she's trying to say is..." or "What he means is..." We know what each of us means better than someone else would. One way to head off this "interpreting" terminator is to invite people to ask for clarification if there is anything they don't understand.

**Interrupting:** We all have had the experience of being interrupted in conversation. I admit that I find this "terminator" the most frustrating and even angering of all. Like "advising" this one also destroys the equality of persons so necessary in healthy communication. On eons, interrupting takes a similar form to "changing the subject". Someone "interrupts" the point of someone else's post with their own stuff. Interrupting, though, isn't necessarily changing the subject as much as it is interrupting the flow of thoughts and ideas with one's own agenda. For example, a while back there was a group of posts related to offensive or perhaps even pornographic material; there were some whose agenda was "censorship" who interrupted every post on the topic of pornographic material with lengthy replies on censorship, drawing people away from the original person's message in the post to address their agenda. This kind of activity terminates discussion, and eventually terminates the very life of any relationship.

**Judging:** When we decide that something or someone is "good or bad" based on our own beliefs, we are standing in judgment over others. That, too, takes the equality out of human interaction thus draining it of its life. Out of "judging" comes labeling others, trying to control others, and trying to manipulate or even force others into doing what we want, or at least thinking like we think. In cyber-space, our judgments reveal themselves all the time in the way we reply to posts, post messages, or talk with each other in private messages. We would come across less like "judges", if we preface our statements and observations with "in my opinion" or "it seems to me". It would also help if we could remove our "labels" that we place on each other and just try to enjoy each others' diversity and way of being.

**Overuse of Humor:** Humor can be very life-giving to conversation. However, it also has the power to terminate it. Just the other day, I watched my husband try to inject humor into an exchange with another person for whom the issue at hand was very serious. She became very angry with him. To his credit, he saw right away that his use of humor had disrespected her and he apologized. When I don't like a post for some reason, I admit it is very tempting to make a joke of it, but this can be interpreted as disrespectful to the person who wrote the post. Most likely the post was serious to them and I need to give space and place for that. Humor is a wonderful enlivening force in communication when used with

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respect and sensitivity.

**Putting Others Down:** Often, it seems to me, we use anonymity, hiding behind the computer screen, rather than meeting face to face, that this provides an excuse to blast away with insults, name calling, and derogatory remarks. We can learn to see with our "inner" eyes, the eyes that see beyond the written word on the page to the invisible person who is typing it. These are the eyes of compassion that see beyond the "seeable" tangible reality of monitor and keyboard to the human heart and mind on the other side of that screen – a human heart and mind that still gets hurt deeply with name-calling and insults even if we can't see them.

**Non-Responsiveness:** Many times some of us receive private messages and we get busy with something else and fail to respond. I know when I reach out to show concern or to connect in some way with someone else, I do hope for a response at some point. And I do feel a twinge of hurt at what seems like "being ignored" if they don't respond. However, I also admit that is my issue. People get busy, they mean to do it "next time" and forget. I know because I am one of those people. I have learned to let the mistakes of non-responsiveness that I make be my source of compassion for others when, for whatever reason, they do not respond. I am also trying to do better at being responsive to everyone who writes to me, even if I have to make myself a list for the next time I am on the computer.

A clear theme has emerged as I have written this. It is the theme of EQUALITY of persons in human interaction. Without people approaching each other as equals -- equally learning from each other, equally giving to and taking from each other, equally respecting each others opinions and diverse ways of seeing and living life -- communication dies. And the things that kill it all seem to destroy the equality in the relationship. The above nine "terminators" all in some way transform the communication into an interaction of "unequals". They terminate listening, conversation, and the very life of interpersonal communication. Let us strive to become aware of these communication "terminators" in ourselves, and in our awareness stop doing them. Then we will not only be true "listeners to life" but in human interaction we will be "bringers of life" as well.