

# Lesson 4.1 Theories of Self-Disclosure

Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To a professor? Have you ever posted something on Facebook only to return later to remove it? When self-disclosure works out well, it can have positive effects on interpersonal relationships. Conversely, self-disclosure that does not work out well can lead to embarrassment, lower self-esteem, relationship deterioration, or even termination. As with all other types of communication, increasing your competence regarding self-disclosure can have many positive effects.



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## What is Self-Disclosure?

It could be argued that any verbal or nonverbal communication reveals something about the self. The clothes we wear, a laugh, or an order at the drive-through may offer glimpses into our personality or past, but they are not necessarily self-disclosure. *Self-disclosure is the purposeful revelation of personal information to another person.* If I purposefully wear the baseball cap of my favorite team to reveal my team loyalty to a new friend, then this clothing choice constitutes self-disclosure. Self-disclosure doesn't always have to be deep to be useful or meaningful. Superficial self-disclosure, often in the form of "small talk," is key in initiating relationships that then move onto more

personal levels of self-disclosure. Telling a classmate your major or your hometown during the first week of school carries relatively little risk but can build into a friendship that lasts beyond the class.

## Theories of Self-disclosure

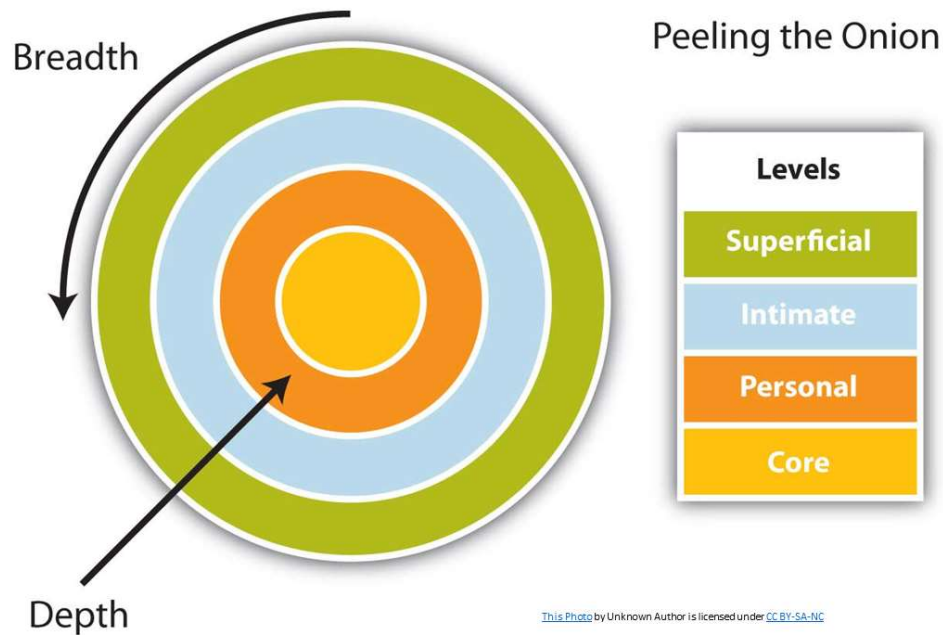
***The Social Penetration Theory*** states that as we get to know someone, we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship develops. *Depth* refers to how personal or sensitive the information is, and *breadth* refers to the range of topics discussed. Kathryn Greene, Valerian J. Derlega, and Alicia Mathews, "Self-Disclosure in Personal Relationships," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 412–13.



While certain circumstances can lead to a rapid increase in the depth and/or breadth of self-disclosure, the theory states that in most relationships people gradually penetrate through the layers of each other's personality like we peel the layers from an onion.

The theory also argues that people in a relationship balance needs that are sometimes in tension, which is a dialectic. Balancing a dialectic is like walking a tightrope. You have to lean to one side and eventually lean to another side to keep yourself balanced and prevent falling. The constant back and forth allows you to stay balanced, even though you may not always be even, or standing straight up. One of the key dialectics that must be negotiated is the tension between openness and closedness. Kathryn

Greene, Valerian J. Derlega, and Alicia Mathews, "Self-Disclosure in Personal Relationships," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 410.



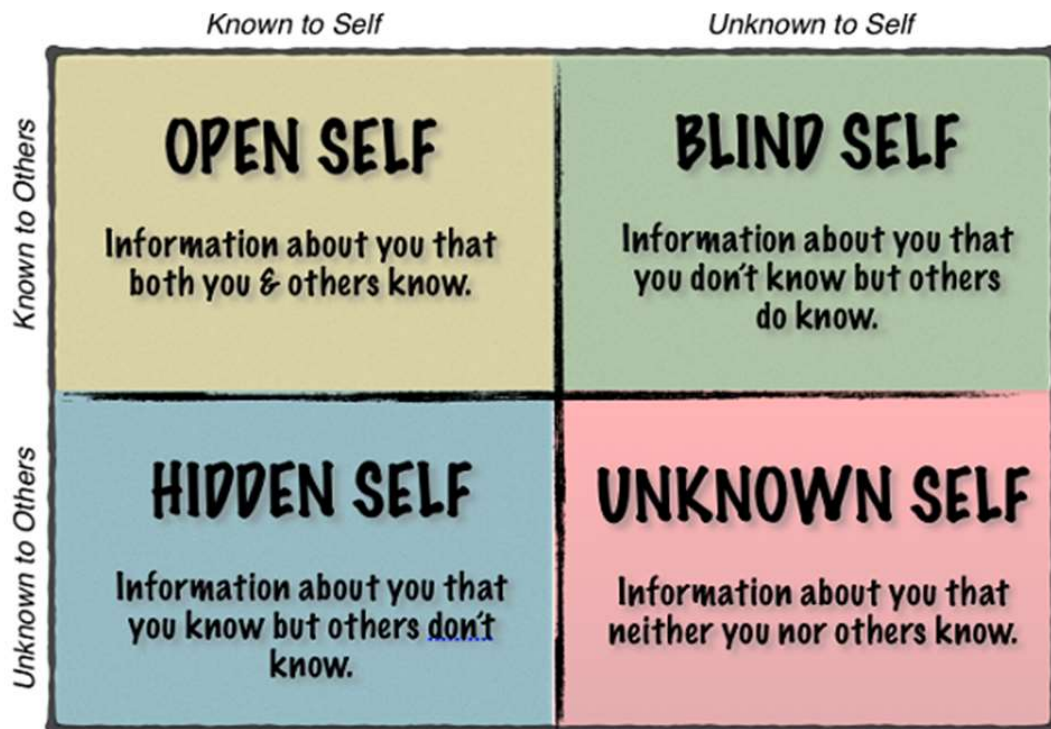
We want to make ourselves open to others, through self-disclosure, but we also want to maintain a sense of privacy.

We may also engage in self-disclosure for the purposes of social comparison. **The Social Comparison Theory** states that we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 261.

We may disclose information about our intellectual aptitude or athletic abilities to see how we relate to others. This type of comparison helps us decide whether we are superior or inferior to others in a particular area. Disclosures about abilities or talents can also lead to self-validation if the person to whom we disclose reacts positively. By disclosing information about our beliefs and values, we can determine if they are the same as or different from others. Last, we may disclose fantasies or thoughts to another to determine whether they are acceptable or unacceptable. We can engage in social comparison as the discloser or the receiver of disclosures, which may allow us to determine whether or not we are interested in pursuing a relationship with another person.

The third and final theory of self-disclosure that we will discuss is the "Johari Window," which is named after its creators Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham. Joseph Luft, *Of Human Interaction* (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1969).

**The Johari Window** can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown. To help understand the concept, think of a window with four panes. One axis of the window represents things that are known to us, and the other axis represents things that are known to others.



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The upper left pane contains open information that is known to us and to others. The amount of information that is openly known to others varies based on relational context. When you are with close friends, there is probably a lot of information already in the open pane, and when you are with close family, there is also probably a lot of information in the open pane. The information could differ, though, as your family might know much more about your past and your friends more about your present. Conversely, there isn't much information in the open pane when we meet someone for the first time, aside from what the other person can guess based on our nonverbal communication and appearance.

*The bottom left pane contains hidden information that is known to us but not to others. As we are getting to know someone, we engage in self-disclosure and move information from the “hidden” to the “open” pane. By doing this, we decrease the size of our hidden area and increase the size of our open area, which increases our shared reality. The reactions that we get from people as we open up to them help us form our self-concepts and also help determine the trajectory of the relationship. If the person reacts favorably to our disclosures and reciprocates disclosure, then the cycle of disclosure continues and a deeper relationship may be forged.*

*The upper right pane contains information that is known to others but not to us. For example, we may be unaware of the fact that others see us as pushy or as a leader. People who have a disconnect between how they see themselves and how others see them may have more information in their blind pane. Engaging in perception checking and soliciting feedback from others can help us learn more about our blind area.*

*The bottom right pane represents our unknown area, as it contains information not known to ourselves or others. To become more self-aware, we must solicit feedback from others to learn more about our blind pane, but we must also explore the unknown pane. To discover the unknown, we have to get out of our comfort zones and try new things. We have to pay attention to the things that excite or scare us and investigate them more to see if we can learn something new about ourselves.*

Another perspective of the Johari window can be seen here--

### Johari Window in Interpersonal Communication



Click on "cc" at the bottom right of the video for assistance with closed captioning.

LEZakel. (2011, February 24). *Johari Window in Interpersonal Communication* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7FhcvoVK8s>

Challenging ourselves to learn more about the panes of the Johari Window will help us become more fully engaged in self-disclosing, which may in turn lead us to confidently enhance our interpersonal relationships.

## **In Summary**

- Self-Disclosure, which is the purposeful revelation of known and unknown information, stands as a basis for developing interpersonal relationships.
- The Social Penetration Theory argues that self-disclosure increases in breadth and depth as a relationship progresses, like peeling back the layers of an onion.
- We engage in Social Comparison through self-disclosure, which may determine whether or not we pursue a relationship.
- The Johari Window distinguishes aspects of ourselves that we may or may not be able to disclose and those that we do or do not wish to disclose. Becoming aware of these categories provides a glimpse into the nature of self-disclosure and why we rely on it to enhance interpersonal relationships.