

# Lesson 4.2 Self-Disclosure and Relationships

Many decisions go into the process of self-disclosure. We have many types of information we can disclose, but we have to determine whether or not we will proceed with disclosure by considering the situation and the potential risks. Then we must decide when, where, and how to disclose it. Since all these decisions will affect our relationships, we need to examine them carefully.



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## The Process of Self-Disclosure

The four primary categories of Self-Disclosure are *observations*, *thoughts*, *feelings*, and *needs*. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 241.

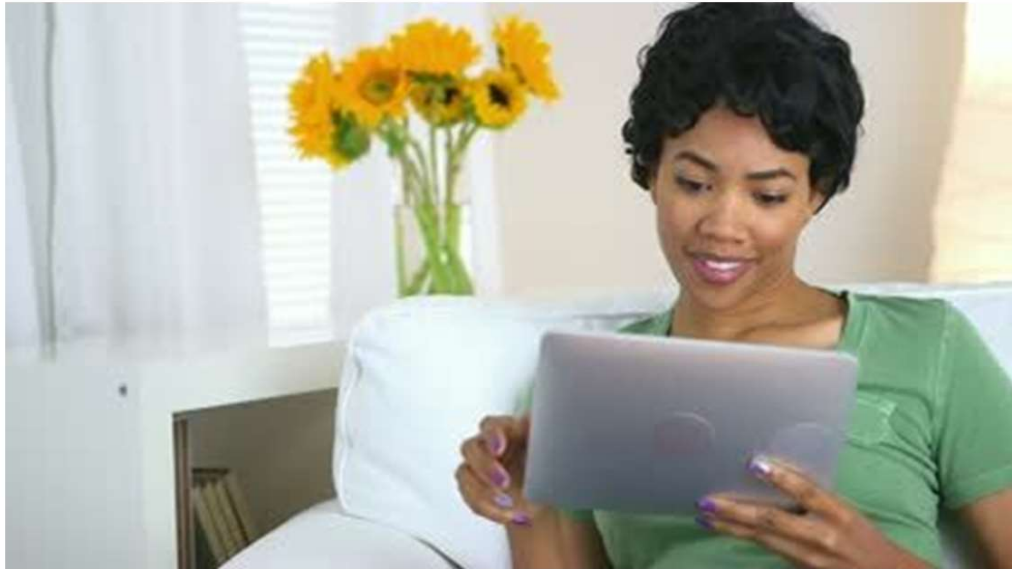
*Observations* include what we have done and experienced. For example, a new acquaintance could tell you that she lives in a farmhouse out in the country. If she tells you that her move from the city to the country was a good decision, she would be sharing her *thoughts*, because she included a judgment about her experiences. Sharing *feelings* includes expressing an emotion. For example, your new friend could say “I’m happy to wake up every morning and look out at the corn fields. I feel lucky.” She is sharing her feelings. Lastly, this new acquaintance would be

communicating *needs* or wants by saying something like “My best friend is looking for a job, and I want him to move here, too.”

We usually begin disclosure with observations and thoughts and then move on to feelings and needs as the relationship progresses. There are some exceptions to this. For example, we are more likely to disclose deeply in crises, and we may also disclose more than usual with a stranger if we do not think we'll meet the person again or do not share social networks. Although we don't often find ourselves in crises, you may recall scenes from movies or television shows where people who are trapped in an elevator or stranded after a plane crash reveal their deepest feelings and desires. Most likely, we've all been in a situation where we said more about ourselves to a stranger than we normally would. To better understand why to let's discuss some of the factors that influence our decision to disclose.

Generally speaking, some people are naturally more transparent and willing to self-disclose, while others are more opaque and hesitant to reveal personal information. Sidney Jourard, *The Transparent Self* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1964).

Interestingly, recent research suggests that the pervasiveness of reality television, much of which includes participants who are very willing to disclose personal information, has led to a general trend among reality television viewers to engage in self-disclosure through other mediated means such as blogging and video sharing. Michael A. Stefanone and Derek Lakaff, “Reality Television as a Model for Online Behavior: Blogging, Photo, and Video Sharing,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (2009): 964–87.



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## To Disclose or Not to Disclose: That is the Question

Whether it is online or face-to-face, there are other reasons for disclosing or not, including *self-focused*, *other-focused*, *interpersonal*, and *situational reasons*. 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), 415–16.

*Self-focused reasons* for disclosure include having a sense of relief or catharsis, clarifying or correcting information, or seeking support. Self-focused reasons for not disclosing include fear of rejection and loss of privacy. In other words, we may disclose to get something off our chest in hopes of finding relief, or we may not disclose out of fear that the other person may react negatively to our revelation.

*Other-focused reasons* for disclosure include a sense of responsibility to inform or educate. Other-focused reasons for not disclosing include feeling like the other person will not protect the information. If someone mentions that their car wouldn't start this morning and you disclose that you are good at working on cars, you've disclosed to help out the other person. On the other hand, you may hold back from disclosing to your coworker the fact that you are dating someone new because that coworker is known to be "loose-lipped" with other people's information.

*Interpersonal reasons* for disclosure involve desires to maintain a trusting and intimate relationship. Interpersonal reasons for not disclosing include fear of losing the

relationship or deeming the information irrelevant to the particular relationship. Your decision to disclose an affair to be open with your partner and hopefully work through the aftermath together or withhold that information out of fear he or she will leave you is based on interpersonal reasons.

Finally, *situational reasons* may be the other person being available, directly asking a question, or being directly involved in or affected by the information being disclosed. Situational reasons for not disclosing include the person being unavailable, a lack of time to fully discuss the information, or the lack of a suitable (i.e., quiet, private) place to talk. For example, finding yourself in a quiet environment where neither person is busy could lead to disclosure, while a house full of company may not.

### **When, Where, and How to Disclose**



Deciding when to disclose something in a conversation may not seem as important as deciding whether or not to disclose it at all. But deciding to disclose and then doing it at an awkward time in a conversation could lead to negative results. As far as timing goes, you should consider whether to disclose the information *early, in the middle, or late* in a conversation. 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), 419–20.

If you get something off your chest early in a conversation, you may ensure that there’s plenty of time to discuss the issue and that you don’t end up losing your nerve.

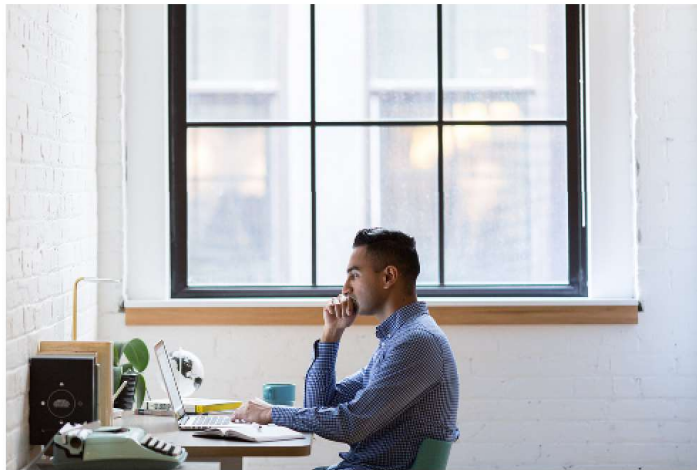
If you wait until the middle of the conversation, you have some time to feel out the other person's mood and set up the tone for your disclosure. For example, if you meet up with your roommate to tell her that you're planning on moving out and she starts by saying, "I've had the most terrible day!" the tone of the conversation has now shifted, and you may not end up making your disclosure. If you start by asking her how she's doing, and things seem to be going well, you may be more likely to follow through with the disclosure. You may choose to disclose late in a conversation if you're worried about the person's reaction. If you know that person has an appointment or you have to go to class at a certain time, disclosing just before that time could limit your immediate exposure to any negative reaction. However, if the person doesn't have a negative reaction, they could still become upset because they don't have time to discuss the disclosure with you.

Sometimes self-disclosure is unplanned. Someone may ask you a direct question or disclose personal information, which leads you to reciprocate disclosure. In these instances, you may not manage your privacy well because you haven't had time to think through any potential risks. In the case of a direct question, you may feel comfortable answering, you may give an indirect or general answer, or you may feel enough pressure or uncertainty to give a dishonest answer. If someone unexpectedly discloses, you may feel the need to reciprocate by also disclosing something personal. If you're uncomfortable doing this, you can still provide support for the other person by listening and giving advice or feedback.



Once you've decided when and where to disclose information to another person, you need to figure out the best channel to use. Face-to-face disclosures may feel more genuine or intimate given the shared physical presence and ability to receive verbal and nonverbal communication. There is also an opportunity for immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback, such as asking follow-up questions or demonstrating support or encouragement through a hug. The immediacy of a face-to-face encounter also means you have to deal with the uncertainty of the reaction you'll get. If the person reacts negatively, you may feel uncomfortable, pressured to stay, or even fearful.

If you choose a mediated channel such as an e-mail or a letter, text, note, or phone call, you may seem less genuine or personal, but you have more control over the situation in that you can take time to carefully choose your words, and you do not have to immediately face the reaction of the other person. This can be beneficial if you fear a negative or potentially violent reaction. Another disadvantage of choosing a mediated channel, however, is the loss of nonverbal communication that can add many contexts to a conversation.



Although our discussion of the choices involved in self-disclosure so far has focused primarily on the discloser, self-disclosure is an interpersonal process that has much to do with the receiver of the disclosure.

### **Effects of Disclosure on the Relationship**

The process of self-disclosure is circular. An individual self-discloses, the recipient of the disclosure reacts, and the original discloser processes the reaction. How the receiver interprets and responds to the disclosure are key elements of the process. Part of the response results from the receiver's attribution of the cause of the

disclosure, which may include *dispositional*, *situational*, and *interpersonal attributions*. L. Crystal Jiang, Natalie N. Bazarova, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "The Disclosure-Intimacy Link in Computer-Mediated Communication: An Attributional Extension of the Hyperpersonal Model," *Human Communication Research* 37 (2011): 63.

Let's say your coworker discloses that she thinks the new boss got his promotion because of favoritism instead of merit. You may make a **dispositional attribution** that connects the cause of her disclosure to her personality by thinking, for example, that she is outgoing, inappropriate for the workplace, or fishing for information. If the personality trait to which you attribute the disclosure is positive, then your reaction to the disclosure is more likely to be positive.

**Situational attributions** identify the cause of a disclosure with the context or surroundings in which it takes place. For example, you may attribute your coworker's disclosure to the fact that you agreed to go to lunch with her.

**Interpersonal attributions** identify the relationship between sender and receiver as the cause of the disclosure. So if you attribute your coworker's comments to the fact that you are best friends at work, you think your unique relationship caused the disclosure. If the receiver's primary attribution is interpersonal, relational intimacy and closeness will likely be reinforced more than if the attribution is dispositional or situational, because the receiver feels like they were specially chosen to receive the information.

The receiver's role doesn't end with attribution and response. There may be added burdens if the information shared with you is a secret. As was noted earlier, there are clear risks involved in self-disclosure of intimate or potentially stigmatizing information if the receiver of the disclosure fails to keep that information secure. As the receiver of a secret, you may feel the need to unburden yourself from the co-ownership of the information by sharing it with someone else. Valerian J. Derlega, Sandra Metts, Sandra Petronio, and Stephen T. Margulis, *Self-Disclosure* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993).



This is not always a bad thing. You may strategically tell someone who is removed from the social network of the person who told you the secret to keep the information secure. Although unburdening yourself can be a relief, sometimes people tell secrets they were entrusted to keep for less productive reasons. A research study of office workers found that 77 percent of workers that received disclosure and were told not to tell anyone else told at least two other people by the end of the day! Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 270.

They reported doing so to receive attention for having inside information or to demonstrate their power or connection. Needless to say, spreading someone's private disclosure without permission for personal gain does not demonstrate communication competence.

Self-disclosure can also have effects on physical health. Spouses of suicide or accidental death victims who did not disclose information to their friends were likely to have more health problems such as weight change and headaches and suffer from more intrusive thoughts about the death than those who did share their concerns with friends. 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), 421.

When the cycle of disclosure ends up going well for the discloser, there is likely to be a greater sense of relational intimacy and self-worth. There are also positive psychological effects such as reduced stress and increased feelings of social support.

## In Summary

- Through the process of self-disclosure, we disclose personal information and learn about others.
- The process of self-disclosure involves many decisions, including what, when, where, and how to disclose. All these decisions may vary by context, as we follow different patterns of self-disclosure in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- The receiver's reaction to and interpretation of self-disclosure are important factors in how the disclosure will affect the relationship.