

is the *self*, and information about the self is *purposefully communicated to another person*.

Although this definition is a start, it ignores the fact that some messages intentionally directed toward others are not especially revealing. For example, telling an acquaintance “I don’t like clams” is quite different from announcing “I don’t like you.” Let’s take a look at several factors that further distinguish self-disclosure from other types of communication.

Honesty It almost goes without saying that true self-disclosure has to be honest. It’s not revealing to say “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before” to every Saturday night date, or to preface every lie with the statement “Let me be honest. . . .”

As long as you are honest and accurate to the best of your knowledge, communication can qualify as an act of self-disclosure. On the other hand, painting an incomplete picture of yourself (telling only part of what’s true) is not genuine disclosure. We’ll talk more about the relationship between honesty and disclosure later in this chapter.



Depth A self-disclosing statement is generally regarded as being personal—containing relatively “deep” rather than “surface” information. Of course, what is personal and intimate for one person may not be for another. You might feel comfortable admitting your spotty academic record, short temper, or fear of spiders to anyone who asks, whereas others would be embarrassed to do so. Even basic demographic information, such as age, can be extremely revealing for some people.

Availability of Information Self-disclosing messages must contain information that the other person is not likely to know at the time or be able to obtain from another source. For example, describing your conviction for a drunk-driving accident might feel like an act of serious disclosure because the information concerns you, is offered intentionally, is honest and accurate, and is considered personal. However, if the other person could obtain that information elsewhere without much trouble—from a glance at the morning newspaper or from various gossips, for example—your communication would not be especially self-disclosing.

Context of Sharing Sometimes the self-disclosing nature of a statement comes from the setting in which it is uttered. For instance, relatively innocuous information about family life seems more personal when a student shares it with the class (Myers, 1998), when an athlete tells it to her coach (Officer & Rosenfeld, 1985), or when it’s shared online (Stritzke et al., 2004).

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