Self-Disclosure

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Self-disclosure is one of the most important verbal behaviors we use to get to know other people and for other people to get to know ourselves. Self-disclosure is composed of two aspects: descriptive aspects and evaluative aspects. We know that people can learn things by looking at us and analyzing our nonverbal behaviors, clothing, and accoutrements, but these are assumptions. True self-disclosure is intentional and we choose what private information to share and how we are going to share it. In that regard, self-disclosure is anything we share that another would have trouble finding out without being told – it is not something that is “observable” like non-verbal communication. Self-disclosure is private in nature, and that means that revealing it puts us at risk for criticism or rejection when we share it with others. Because of this, there has to be a level of trust established before we are comfortable disclosing private information. Private information are the assessments and descriptions, both good and bad, that we make about ourselves, including our personal values, our interests, our fears, and our concerns. Public information contrasts with private information. Public information are the facts about us, usually socially approved characteristics, that we make part of our public image. There isn’t as much risk involved in sharing public information.

Some information is easier to share with others because it involves our history. History is personal in nature but it is easy to talk about because we have told it and retold it. Story is like history but to the teller, it is more risky to share because the topic is more intimate. The degree of risk is very personal in nature and the degree of topical intimacy depends on the teller. Each person has a different comfort level with what they are comfortable sharing and what they think of as intimate. Think about the last encounter you had with someone that shared too much, too fast with you. We actually have code phrases for when this happens and will say “TMI” for “too much information” when we hear someone share in a way that we feel is inappropriate self-disclosure. In this way, we help police other’s self-disclosures when they inappropriately share too much with us.

Self-disclosure varies depending on the length of the relationship. We self-disclose more in the early stages of a relationship than we do in long-term relationships. This isn’t surprising when we consider that the “getting to know you” stage is when we share all sorts of information about ourselves and this is when we “get to know each other.” Relationships that have a long history, those that have endured and stabilized, don’t require as much self-disclosure because the participants already know much about each other. We often see if we “click” with someone before we share greater intimate conversation and sometimes we meet a person we almost instantly “click” with. The ones we instantly click with don’t require a gradual building into the relationship. No matter if we instantly click with a new acquaintance or we gradually build the relationship over time, the longer we know the person, the less self-disclosure we will share because we have a greater history with the person.

Self-disclosure varies around the globe. In low context cultures like in the United States, people are individualistic in nature. Self-disclosure is valued because openness over privacy is favored. In high context cultures like Japan or China that are collectivist in nature, privacy is favored over openness.
People in North America tend to talk much more openly about their emotions and feelings than Asians do. Again, these are tendencies, not absolute fact. Self-disclosure is at its basic level very much individual. As our world becomes smaller with the rise in online relationships and global technologies including social media, the differences between self-disclosure across global cultures are changing as well. We can’t even say that self-disclosure is gender specific. The assumption is that women self-disclose more than men, but what researchers have discovered is that men and women disclose about the same amount of information. The only difference is that women just use more words to self-disclose than men do. Not surprising because women use nearly 2/3 more words in a given day than men do.

Despite self-disclosure varying by individual, there are four principles of self-disclosure researchers have determined to be common.

1. **We disclose a great deal but in only a few interactions.** If we look at our communication over the course of an entire day or over a week, we will discover that the majority of our conversation is not self-disclosure. We talk to get things, to do our jobs, to achieve goals, to survive life, and relatively little of that communication would be qualified as self-disclosure. When we do self-disclose, it is rare.

2. **Self-disclosures occur the most between two people in a close relationship.** People disclose the most private information in family relationships and close friendships, not among small groups or larger groups of people.

3. **Self-disclosures are reciprocal.** There is a dyadic effect that occurs with self-disclosure. This is when we experience self-disclosure from another, we will tend to share or self-disclose back to them. This means that self-disclosure depends on reciprocity where one person shares and then the other person shares, repeating the process. This could be immediate reciprocity during a conversation or it could be a longer-term reciprocity over the course of an entire relationship.

4. **Self-disclosures occur over time.** We will start with low-level self-disclosure in the early stages of a relationship and then as we create a deeper commitment to the relationship, our self-disclosures become much more intimate as our relationships deepen.

Along with the four principles of self-disclosure, there are three theories that help us understand self-disclosure in our lives.

*Communication Privacy Management Theory* (Jourard, 1971) helps us understand how and why people decide to reveal or conceal private information. The theory suggests that there are boundaries around private information. Private information is “owned” by a person until the person shares it with someone else. At that point the private information becomes co-owned by both parties. If the boundaries in sharing that private information are fringed upon and it is shared without mutual consent, then boundary turbulence can occur. In the future, the original owner may decide to not share additional private information if the turbulence is not resolved.

*The Social Penetration Model* (Altman & Taylor, 1973; West & Turner, 2014) is a theory that shows how sharing personal information intensifies a relationship’s intimacy level. Think of this way...people have many layers just like an onion does. The outer skin of the onion is the first layer and this is the
easiest information shared from the person. It’s also the fat part of the onion so there is a plentitude of personal information that fits in this layer, or a lot of breadth to the topics the person might share. As we move to the inside or the smaller part of the onion, the information becomes more private and more personal in nature. This is where we find the greater depth of information on a topic. Each person you interact with fits at a different layer on the social penetration model.

Like the Social Penetration Model, the **Johari Window** (Luft & Ingham, 1970) combines self-disclosure and self-awareness of how we share personal information. Like a window pane, the Johari Window provides a way to look at what we share with others. The Johari Window is a model that depicts the four aspects of ourselves – the publicly known or open self, the hidden self that we don’t tell anyone about, the things about ourselves that others know but we don’t, or the blind self, and the great unknown self which is the self of the future, our potential. When you look at the model, there are four quadrants which make up areas of the self.

The **open** area includes aspects of the self that are known to you and known to other people. I call this the “name, rank, serial number” area because this is where your public information would go. In my open area, this would include my name, position/title, phone number, address, and even email address.

The **hidden** area includes aspects of the self that are known to you but you keep them hidden from other people. I call this the “private” or “secret” area because these are things I don’t generally share with other people. In my hidden area, this includes my weight, dumb things that I’ve done in the past that I definitely don’t bring up to people, and my secret fascinations with some subjects.

The **blind** area includes aspects of the self that others know about you but you tend to be blind to them. I call this the “others see it but I don’t” area. In my blind area, this includes that I may appear to be strong willed, opinionated, and highly intelligent to other people. The reality might be that I often feel unsure about myself and inadequate in some situations, so I might not see myself in the same manner that others see me. I have a good friend who got agitated in a graduate class we were taking together. I
could tell she was agitated because her foot was hopping up and down and she was clenching her teeth. I leaned over and said “quit clenching your teeth, your jaw is going to cramp up!” She looked at me shocked and said she hadn’t realized she was clenching her teeth. When I told her that she did that all the time, she was even more shocked!

The **unknown** area includes aspects of the self that are unknown to you and to other people. I call this the “future” category. My unknown area includes talents that I may have but I may not have experimented with them to develop them. For instance, I spend a lot of time in the theater working with furniture for the stage. In that capacity, I’ve gained knowledge of furniture time periods, fabrics, and refinishing. I’ve always thought that I might like to recover some of my personal furniture pieces but since I’ve never done this, I really don’t know if I will be any good at it. The unknown would be that I might be great at this and someday, it might be my career or hobby. Or, I might be terrible at it! It’s completely unknown.

There are many positive benefits to self-disclosure:

1. To experience catharsis and improve psychological health. When we share, we mentally feel better. When we share good news especially, we feel particularly good.
2. To improve physical health. Numerous studies show that letting out negative experiences improves our physical health and holding them inside eats away at our physical being.
3. To achieve self-awareness. By sharing our personal information and receiving feedback, we establish our self-concept.
4. To initiate a relationship. Sharing private information helps us develop new relationships.
5. To maintain existing relationships. Sharing private information helps keep us connected to those we are involved with.
6. To satisfy expectations of what constitutes a good relationship. Intimacy is expected in our closest relationships.
7. To escalate a relationship. If we want a relationship to grow, we must share personal information.

Self-disclosure does not always result in positive interactions. There are times when we might choose to conceal our personal information rather than share it:

1. To avoid hurt and rejection.
2. To avoid conflict and protect a relationship.
3. To keep your image intact and maintain individuality.
4. To avoid stress and depression.