

Communication Unpacked



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WHY YOU KEEP HAVING THE SAME FIGHT: A Trauma-Informed Look at Communication Breakdowns

Most of us think we're fighting about surface stuff - the tone of a message, the chores that didn't get done, or who said what in a moment of frustration. But underneath those everyday triggers, there's usually something much deeper happening.

When you've lived through trauma, especially relational or childhood trauma, communication doesn't start from a neutral place. It starts from a place of protection. From your nervous system scanning for danger, from old beliefs about whether you're allowed to have needs, and from parts of you that learned early on that staying quiet might be safer than speaking up.

So even when both people care, conversations can spiral.

You might ask a gentle question, and your partner hears criticism.

They might go quiet, and you assume they're angry.

You might try to keep the peace and end up people-pleasing instead of being honest. This isn't about drama. It's about survival strategies that once kept you safe, now showing up in adult relationships where they no longer fit.

The result?

- 🌀 Misunderstandings that never get cleared up
- 🌀 Defensiveness instead of listening
- 🌀 Arguments that go nowhere
- 🌀 Emotional distance that builds slowly
- 🌀 Needs that stay unspoken until they come out sideways

Most of us were never taught how to talk through hard feelings. Especially if you've experienced emotional neglect, betrayal, or any form of relational trauma, then asking for reassurance or setting a boundary might feel terrifying, even though it's exactly what's needed.

This guide walks through some of the most common communication breakdowns, and more importantly, what's going on underneath them. Not just the behaviours, but the fear, shame, and longing underneath the surface.

Because good communication isn't about being perfect. It's about noticing when you're spiralling, learning how to pause instead of react, and finding your way back to connection, without losing yourself in the process.

Let's talk about the real stuff. The stuff no one taught us how to do.

Kellie

How to start a Tricky conversation (without feeling like a burden)

A simple guide for asking if someone's up for a chat, sharing what you need, and setting healthy limits - with out guilt or over-explaining

Step 1: Check if it's a good time

Before diving in, it helps to check if the other person is in a headspace to listen not because your feelings don't matter, but because timing can make a big difference.

Ask something like:

- "Hey, can I talk to you about something important for maybe 10 minutes? Is now okay?"
- "I've been sitting on something and I'm wondering if you've got the headspace for it."
- "Are you up for a slightly deeper convo or should we come back to it later today or tomorrow?"

If they say no or seem off:

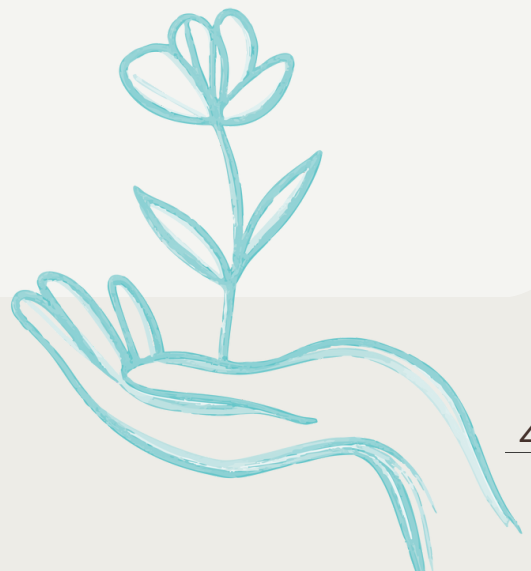
- "All good - thanks for being honest. Can we come back to it when things feel a bit calmer sooner rather than later?"

Step 2: Say what you need (you don't have to get it perfect)

This isn't about being dramatic or having all the answers it's just about being real. You're allowed to ask for what helps.

Try:

- "I don't need fixing or a solution, just someone to hear me out."
- "I just need to vent - no need to problem solver, I just need someone to hear me"
- "I'm not even sure what I need, I just know I don't want to sit in this alone."
- "I want to talk about something without it turning into a fight, is that okay?"



“When you’ve spent your life protecting yourself, honesty can feel dangerous. But it’s also where real closeness begins.”

Step 3: Be honest - and kind

You don’t have to apologise for how you feel. But if you’re worried it’ll come out wrong, you can soften it without watering it down.

You could say:

- “This feels a little awkward to bring up, but I’m trying because it matters to me.”
- “I’m not mad, I just want to feel more understood.”
- “I’m saying this because I care, not to blame you.”
- “I know I can go quiet sometimes, but I want to be better at saying what’s going on.”

Step 4: Set limits without pushing people away

- Boundaries don’t have to sound cold or formal. They can actually make things feel safer and clearer for everyone.

Try saying:

- “If this gets too heavy, I might need to pause and come back to it later.”
- “I’m happy to talk, but I can’t do raised voices or shutting each other down.”
- “I want to go slow with this, it’s not easy for me to talk about.”
- “If I get quiet, it’s not because I don’t care, I just need a second to think or calm down.”

“Not being ready to listen doesn’t make you cold or selfish. It means your nervous system matters too.”

Step 5: Wrap it up gently

Not everything gets wrapped in a bow, but you can still end in a way that feels respectful and keeps the door open.

Say something like:

- “Thanks for hearing me - even if it felt a bit messy.”
- “I’m glad we talked, even if it wasn’t easy.”
- “If anything I said felt off, I’m open to hearing how it landed for you.”
- “Let’s keep checking in - I don’t want this to be a one-off thing

And if it doesn’t go well?

- Sometimes people aren’t ready. Sometimes they get defensive, or don’t know how to respond. That’s not proof you did something wrong.

Remind yourself:

- “It’s okay to need things. That doesn’t make me too much.”
- “I showed up with honesty and that counts.”
- “Even if it felt uncomfortable, I don’t have to shut myself down again.”



HOW TO ASK FOR A BREAK

Mid-Conversation

(when it's getting too much)

You're allowed to step back before you shut down, snap, or dissociate.
A break isn't avoidance, it's care.

What You Can Say (Simple and Clear):

- "This is important to me, but I'm starting to feel overwhelmed. We need take a breather and come back to it?"
- "I want to keep talking, but I need a few minutes to clear my head first."
- "I'm not in a place to keep going right now. We need to pause and talk about it again later today?"
- "I can feel myself getting flooded. I need to take 10 minutes and then we can see how we're both feeling?"

If You Need a Bigger Break (Not Just 10 Minutes):

- "This is a lot for me right now. Can we check in tomorrow when I've had more time to process?"
- "I want to come back to this, but I need some space to work through how I'm feeling first."
- "I'm not trying to avoid you, I just need to pause before I say something I regret or shut down."

"I need to walk away — not because I don't care, but because I do. I want to come back as the version of me who can listen, not the one who's about to explode."

WHEN SOMEONE REACTS BADLY TO THAT REQUEST

You're not responsible for how they feel about your boundary, but you can still respond with calm and clarity.

If they say something like "Don't walk away" or "You always do this"

- "I'm not walking away from you, I'm taking space so this doesn't turn into something hurtful."
- "I get that you're upset. I'm trying to make this work by taking space - not to punish you."
- "I need you to trust that this is me trying to come back calm, not storming off."
- "I want to talk, just not like this. We both deserve to feel safe in the conversation."

If They Refuse the Break or Push Harder:

- Sometimes the other person won't get it, especially if they fear abandonment or rejection.

You can try:

- "I know this is hard to hear, but I'm not available to keep talking right now. I need a break, even if you don't agree with it."
- "I'm not asking for permission, I'm letting you know what I need."
- "We can pick this up later, but I'm stepping away for now. We'll get further when we're both calmer."

If it's unsafe or aggressive:

- "I'm ending this conversation now. I'll talk when it's safe and respectful to do so."

"Love during the hard times doesn't mean never fighting - it means finding your way back after the storm."

“Self-care isn’t always candles and baths. Sometimes it’s pausing before you snap, breathe, and come back to yourself.”



What You Might Feel Afterwards
(And That’s Okay):

- Guilt
- Shame
- Doubt
- “Did I make things worse?”
- “Are they going to leave me now?”

You can remind yourself:

- “I didn’t abandon the conversation - I protected it.”
- “It’s okay to prioritise calm over closure.”
- “If someone can’t respect a small boundary, the problem isn’t the boundary.”

Why Communication Breaks Down and what’s actually going on beneath the shutdown, the snappiness, or the silence.

We tend to think communication is about the words we say.

But for trauma survivors and emotionally overwhelmed adults, it’s more often about what’s unsaid - what’s felt, what’s assumed, what we’re afraid will happen if we speak up.

So when things go off track, it’s rarely about the dishes or the phone call or that one snide comment.

It’s about what’s happening inside us that the other person can’t see, and what we think their behaviour means about us, or about the relationship.

Let’s go deeper.



*"Not every thought is truth.
Some are old survival stories
dressed up as logic."*

1. MISINTERPRETATION & ASSUMPTIONS

"They said one small thing, and now I feel completely shut down."

This happens fast - like, nervous-system-level fast.

You hear a tone, see a look, or read a text differently than it was meant, and your brain fills in the blanks with stories.

Why?

Because your body remembers being left, judged, or emotionally unsafe. So, it jumps to protect you.

"They didn't text back for four hours."

They're ignoring me.

They don't care.

They're probably already halfway out the door.

This isn't about drama - it's about survival. Especially, if you've learned from a young age to read people's micro-signals to keep yourself safe.

What to try instead:

"Hey, my brain's kind of running wild - can I check what you meant by that?"

"I think I heard that through some old stuff - would you mind saying it again a different way?"

You're not wrong for having a reaction. But you can slow down the story and check what's real.

**“Trauma doesn’t always shout, ‘I’m scared.’ Sometimes it whispers, ‘This is definitely true.’
Give it a second look, a moment of bravery.”**

2. DEFENSIVENESS & BLAME

“They brought something up and suddenly it’s turned into a list of all the things I do wrong.”

This one’s a dance between two wounded parts:

One person says, “I’m hurt,” and the other hears, “You’re bad.” So instead of listening, they defend. They blame back. They shut down.

This is especially common for people with shame-based trauma. If you grew up feeling like you were always in trouble, any feedback can feel like an attack, even if it’s soft.

“It’s not that I don’t care - it’s just that I always feel like I’m failing.”

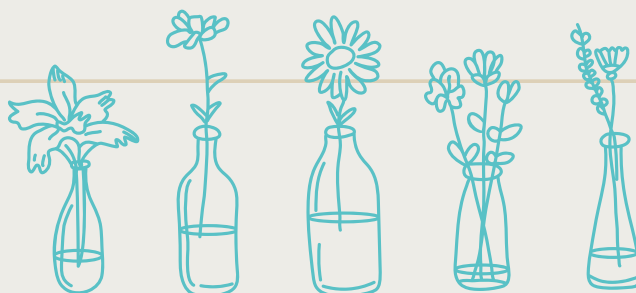
“I need to be able to tell you something’s not working without it turning into a war.”

What to try instead:

“I notice I’m getting defensive - give me a second so I can actually hear you.”

“Can we make space for both of us to be uncomfortable without blaming each other?”

This isn’t about fault. It’s about being human and scared, and wanting to be right and loved at the same time.



“Regulating yourself isn’t a delay - it’s the work. Take the time. You’re allowed to come back grounded.”

3. ESCALATING ARGUMENTS WITHOUT RESOLUTION

“Every conversation ends in a fight, and nothing ever feels fixed.”

This usually happens when you’ve both hit nervous system overload. You’re in fight/flight. Words are louder. Eyes are sharper. Everyone’s goal has shifted from understanding to surviving the moment.

You might find yourself saying things you don’t mean. Or repeating the same point over and over just to feel heard. Or saying, “Whatever,” because you’ve already given up.

But underneath, it’s this:

“Please hear me before I lose myself.”

“Please care enough to help me feel safe again.”

“Please stop fighting me - I want to be with you, not against you.”

What to try instead:

“I think we’re both past our limit - let’s pause before we say things we can’t take back.”

“Can we come back to this when we’re less activated, triggered, angry, upset?”

It matters to me - I just can’t do it well right now,
I can’t process, think right now, let’s check in later”

A break isn’t giving up. It’s choosing repair over reactivity.



"When we slow down and truly hear each other, we stop reacting and start reconnecting."

4. LACK OF PRIORITISATION

"We talk about chores and bills, but I can't remember the last time we really talked about us."

This one creeps in quietly. You're busy. You're tired. Life keeps moving. But the emotional check-ins stop. The "how are we doing" convos get replaced by "what's for dinner" and "did you pay that thing?"

Suddenly, you feel like flatmates. Or project managers. Or strangers in the same house.

This isn't about being too busy - it's about what gets lost when we stop making each other important.

"I love you. But I don't feel chosen, seen lately."

"I want us to stop being background noise to each other's lives."

What you could try instead:

"Can we have a no-distraction chat this weekend - just us?"

"I miss feeling like we see each other, not just function next to each other."

"Let's not wait for a breakdown to reconnect."



“Love doesn’t mean never disagreeing. It means caring enough to stay curious when it would be easier to shut down.”

5. UNSPOKEN EXPECTATIONS

“I’m disappointed, but I never actually said what I needed.”

This is one of the biggest emotional traps — expecting someone to meet a need you never voiced, and then resenting them when they don’t.

But if you were raised not to need things, or told your needs were too much... of course, asking feels terrifying.

So you hope they’ll notice. Guess. Do it without asking. And when they don’t - it stings.

“I needed you to check on me.”

“I thought you’d offer help without me having to beg.”

“I didn’t want to spell it out. I just wanted you to care.”

What to try instead:

“I have to be honest about something I was hoping for, even though I didn’t say it?”

“I’m working on voicing my needs, this is awkward for me, but I’m trying.”

“Next time, can I ask for _____ instead of holding it in?”

Naming it isn’t needy. It’s brave.

6. STRUGGLES WITH TRUST & COMMITMENT (UNSPOKEN FEARS)

"We don't talk about where we stand. But I think about it all the time."

This one cuts deep. If trust has been broken - either in this relationship or past ones- you might carry invisible tension into every conversation.

Will they leave?

Are they hiding something?

Do they want to be here, do they want to be with me?

The hard part is: the more we avoid talking about it, the more it festers. And the less secure we feel.

"I'm scared to bring this up because I don't want to be seen as insecure."

"If I ask for clarity, will they pull away?"

"If I don't ask, will I always feel on edge?"

What to try instead:

"Can we talk about how we're both feeling in the relationship - not to pressure, but to understand each other?"

"There are things I've been scared to ask, but I want and need to feel more settled and secure between us."

"Let's be awkward and honest instead of quiet and confused."

*"Communication is how we say:
I see you. I'm still here.
We can do this together."*

“I wonder if I’ve missed chances to speak love, ask for clarity, or name a need — not because I didn’t care, but because I didn’t know how.”

7. THE PERFORMANCE TRAP

“I’m saying the right things, but I’m not actually being real.”

What it looks like:

One or both people are communicating, but it’s performative - saying what they think they’re supposed to say, keeping the tone light, intellectualising feelings, or using therapeutic language to avoid vulnerability.

What’s underneath:

- Fear of being too much
- Fear of being misunderstood or making things worse
- Past experiences where vulnerability wasn’t met with safety

What it creates:

Surface-level connection that feels emotionally flat.

They might say, “We’re talking all the time, but I don’t feel close to them.”

What to try instead:

“Can we take off the ‘polite’ version of us for a moment and talk about what’s really going on underneath?”

“I’ve been saying what I think will keep the peace, I haven’t been honest about what’s building inside me.”

8. SILENT AGREEMENTS

"We're both avoiding the topic and pretending that means we're on the same page."

What it looks like:

Two people avoid a conversation so consistently that it becomes an unspoken agreement not to go there. No one asks. No one challenges it. It just stays off-limits even though it's very much in the room.

What's underneath:

- Fear that bringing it up will break everything
- A learned pattern of avoiding discomfort
- A hope that the issue will resolve itself without needing to talk about it

What it creates:

A quiet disconnect. A slow erosion of intimacy.
One or both people feel they're tiptoeing, but can't name why.

What to try instead:

"I think there's something we've both been avoiding and I'd like to attempt to talk about it, gently."

"We haven't said it out loud, but I feel the weight of it. Can we go there even if it's messy?"

Most communication breakdowns aren't about language.

They're about protection. About survival. About scared parts trying to feel safe, even if it means pushing people away.

You're not "bad at communication."

You're good at surviving things that never taught you how to be open, vulnerable, or safe in closeness.

But you can learn. Slowly. One conversation at a time.

Beyond The pages

LET'S MASTER THE ART OF AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

We offer trauma therapy that makes room for the messy parts:

- EMDR, parts work & nervous system repair
- Space to talk about sex, kink, and trauma without weird looks
- Individual and couples sessions - online or in-person (Midland WA, and Aust-wide online)
- Therapy that doesn't just talk - it helps your body feel again



**IF YOU'RE WONDERING WHAT TO DO NOW...
START WITH ONE STEP:**

1. Not ready to talk?

Come sit quietly in my corner of the internet:

[.@traumatherapyperth](https://www.instagram.com/traumatherapyperth)

2. Feel safer writing it out?

Send me a note. No pressure, no polished words needed:

admin@kelliesheldon.com.au

3. Want to see if this could actually help?

Book a free 15-minute chat. It's not a pitch - it's a chance to see if you feel safe.

admin@kelliesheldon.com.au

