



Share and share alike

The practice of self-disclosure helps to build and nurture friendships. Learning how much to divulge, however – and when – is like a dance. It takes time and practice, so watch your step

Personal information. Some people are relaxed about sharing anything and everything, others keep schtum about seemingly insignificant details, while most are somewhere in the middle – their decision to divulge life events and worries dependent on the situation and who’s on the opposite end of a conversation. For many, the sharing (or not) of information is also at the root of new connections and determines whether, for example, an acquaintance becomes a friend who goes on to become a confidante. In that process of opening up, people have the chance to begin to know and understand each other, establish a relationship and build trust. Within this context, it’s possible to talk candidly about life challenges as the friendship evolves and both parties feel safer to show and express their vulnerable side.

Forging connections

Within the area of psychology, the term self-disclosure refers to the act of sharing personal information about oneself. The American Psychological Association dictionary defines self-disclosure as: ‘The act of revealing personal or private information about one’s self to other people. In relationships research, self-disclosure has been shown to foster feelings of closeness and intimacy. In psychotherapy, the revelation and expression by the client of personal, innermost feelings, fantasies, experiences and aspirations is believed by many to be a requisite for therapeutic change and personal growth.’

It’s important to note that self-disclosure isn’t the same as venting about personal struggles with a relative or long-term

friend. Carrie A Cohen is a psychotherapist and licensed clinical social worker in Florida in the US. Her early training was in psychoanalytic therapy, an area where the practitioner never reveals anything about themselves. Recently, however, she has begun to disclose personal information in client sessions. She describes self-disclosure as simply ‘sharing a fact about oneself’.

‘In the past few years, I’ve been transitioning the way I work with therapy clients, so [that] I’m not purely a blank slate any more,’ she says. ‘I use self-disclosure sparingly. For example, if I’m working with a mother, I’ll share more of my experiences as a mum. If I’m working with a couple, I’ll share more of my experiences in my own relationship as part of a couple. The benefit in cases where it’s useful is that it gives the client something [that] resonates and [they can] connect with. There are certain things [where] it can be helpful [for them] to know you truly understand that paradigm, such as being a parent.’

In a similar way, rather than venting, new friends can share and exchange information as a means of building connection and understanding. Have you ever noticed how a friendship begins to bloom when personal details are shared? Arguably, this is because when people talk about challenging aspects of their life and maybe even expose their vulnerabilities, it reinforces the fact that everyone’s human and has struggles.

Deborah Vinall is a California-based psychologist, family therapist and author of *Gaslighting: A Step-By-Step Recovery Guide*. She explains: ‘Self-disclosure builds authenticity, as you can’t really build a relationship unless you are your

true self. We all have our insecurities, so when somebody else shares their imperfections, we can feel a little better, we can let our guard down.’

When self-disclosure goes well, it’s almost like a dance. Both parties observe what the other is doing, mirroring each other in what they share and gradually going deeper. Each partner moves gracefully and smoothly, knowing which step to take at any given time. And the dance – or exchange of information – can move slowly or quickly, depending on the participants. There are different styles, too. Extroverts, for example, tend to disclose more than introverts. Part of the movement is tuning into your own style as well as the other person’s reactions, creating a dance that suits both personalities. Needless to say, this isn’t always easy and it’ll feel different for everyone.

Acknowledging the grey area

It might be the case that telling a personal story is akin to stepping out of your comfort zone, but it shouldn’t feel like free-falling without a parachute. This will resonate with anyone who’s experienced a moment of oversharing, resulting in what US professor and podcast host Brené Brown terms a ‘vulnerability hangover’. There’s no comfort in wishing it was possible to go back and unsay something revealed in an earlier conversation. Discomfort can also arise if you’re the listener and feel a fledgling friend has revealed too much of themselves too soon, leaving you unsure of how to respond and unclear as to whether you need to do anything with the information. It’s

a grey area. Say too much and there’s a risk that a potential friend will step back; say too little and they might do the same, feeling you’re not invested in the friendship.

While self-disclosure is instinctual for some, it’s not the same for everyone. Deborah says: ‘I don’t know if it’s always instinctual if you haven’t always had healthy relationships. If you’re trying to build something new and healthier than you’ve had before it can be challenging to figure out what the right dynamic is.’

Confidence in self-disclosing can sometimes relate to childhood and the behaviour of family and friends. If adult caregivers tended to overwhelm you with their traumas and feelings, it might have led to a cautious approach to sharing. Conversely, if they bottled up their emotions and thoughts, it might mean the skill of sharing personal information must be learned from scratch.

Another reason can be fear of a lack of interest. Deborah says: ‘It’s hard to self-disclose if you got the message in your earlier life and the experiences that shaped you that you are too much and you’re not allowed to take up space. There can be unwritten rules and acknowledged beliefs about yourself and the world. Maybe you’ve been shamed into silence a lot in your earlier years and haven’t been given a receptive audience with your caregivers. Those early formative experiences can give you the message not to burden others or share your story.’

That said, no pattern of sharing is written in stone. As an adult, it’s possible to learn and hone the skill, bringing greater



FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Journal writing is one way of exploring how you feel about sharing personal information. Set a timer for 10 minutes to write down how you feel about the two topics here, using the prompts to guide you through the exercise

History

- How easy – or not – do you find self-disclosure?
- Are you the kind of person who jumps in and shares anything and everything with new friends or does it take you more time to feel safe?
- As a child, what sort of messages did you receive from the adults around you about sharing personal facts and stories?

Longing to share

- What feels hard to say?
- What hides away like a difficult secret?
- What would you really like to tell someone?
- What would be the ideal response you would like to receive?

awareness to conversations and developing confidence in knowing what to share and when. If this feels difficult, Deborah suggests paying attention as you ‘share easier things back and forth [and observing] the kind of reception you get. Are they the kind of person who listens? Are they the kind of person who says: “Tell me more”? Or are they the kind of person who doesn’t want to hear anything that isn’t fluffy or good-vibes only? Maybe dance with lighter themes and notice how they react.’

Carrie says it’s also helpful to tune into body language. Signs of having overshared might be ‘if we don’t really get anything back from the other person, some kind of validation or affirmation that it was taken in. Another would be if we see them start to pull away to create space between us because it was too much. You can track the unfolding of the relationship and see if it brings you closer together or not.’

If there’s a nagging feeling that’s causing you to hold back, listen. Deborah suggests asking yourself: ‘Is this from my own fear or is it coming from something I’ve picked up from the other person?’ Often it’s safe to disclose, but your feelings and history might be making you overly cautious. At other times, however, your evaluation of a situation will correctly tell you it’s not the right time to share.

This all works for face-to-face communication. But what about phone calls or digital exchanges where there are no visual cues? For the former, it might work just to ask if the other person

has the time and emotional capacity to listen. As an example, Deborah suggests saying: ‘I’d like to share something I’ve never shared before and I’m just wondering if you have the space to listen?’ For the latter, it’s wise to err on the side of caution. Information shared on social media platforms is rarely private and it’s impossible to control where and how it might be shared, so don’t divulge anything that you wish to remain between you and only one other person. Instead, ask to talk to them on the phone or in person and then check if they’re okay to listen.

Just like learning a dance, self-disclosure and friendship building takes time, practice and understanding. The steps will sometimes go awry and you might land on each other’s toes now and then. That’s okay. It’s life. And just as there are messy stories that need the right conditions to be safely told, attempts to share or listen can be untidy. What’s important is just to keep trying and exploring the options (see opposite). But whether it’s boldly sharing something personal or gracefully holding back until the timing is right, self-disclosure often plays a key role in the formation of long-lasting friendships.

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