MODULE 2

Communication Tips for Post OEF/OIF Service Members/Veterans and Their Families

Materials Needed:
- Handout 6: Communicating With Your Loved One
- Handout 7: Practicing “I” Messages
- Handout 8: Softened Start-up

Provider Note: Today’s class focuses on improving communication skills. The first portion of the module is a discussion of the importance of communication skills, while the second portion focuses service members/veterans and their families on learning some specific communication tools.

Check-In from Previous Week & Introduction:
- Ask any new group members to introduce themselves and review the group guidelines and confidentiality with them.
- Ask if any group members have questions from the previous week.
- Check-in regarding how the caring behaviors homework went.
- Introduce today’s topic of communication and explain that the focus of today’s class will be on developing and strengthening communication strategies.

I. The Importance of Communication Skills

? Discussion Question:
- Why should we work on improving our communication skills?

Provider Note: Write down the answers the group brings up. Some of the topics to make sure the group covers are:

A. Improving communication skills can reduce the level of frustration and stress in the family and can facilitate healthy interactions.

B. When family members of post OEF/OIF service members/veterans are asked about their concerns, they often report significant worry about the high level of stress in the household and the nature of the relationships within the family.
C. Being able to communicate and genuinely trying to understand each other’s feelings can be very meaningful.

D. “The most healing gift you can give to someone in pain is the awareness that you are honestly trying to understand what they are going through, even if you get it wrong” (Hudson, 1996).

Provider Note: Ask the group to discuss what they think about this statement: “The most healing gift…” Do group members agree? Disagree? What does it mean to the group?

II. Understanding How the OEF/OIF Experience Can Impact Communication

Provider Note: Individuals who have gone through the experience of war often process information differently. Help family members understand these points in order to facilitate more effective communication with post OEF/OIF service members/veterans (material adapted from Woolis, 1992):

Issue #1: Sometimes post OEF/OIF service members/veterans withdraw (physically and/or emotionally) due to feeling over-stimulated. They may turn to excessive use of substances, videogames, or other “escapes” rather than engaging with family members. They may have a reduced capacity for emotion, so they can feel overwhelmed more easily and quickly.

Family Member Tip: Family members are encouraged to avoid taking the withdrawal personally and to remain available if the service member/veteran wants to talk later. You may wish to initiate a discussion about the pattern at a later time.

Issue #2: Social situations can sometimes be stressful for post OEF/OIF service members/veterans, as groups or crowds can be threatening and anxiety-provoking (especially for individuals with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other anxiety disorders).

Family Member Tip: The returning service member/veteran may feel more comfortable with having only one or a few visitors at a time. The length and/or frequency of large group activities may also need to be limited. It may be helpful to work out a compromise in advance of social situations. For example, the service member/veteran may not go to an event, but the family member still can, or you may agree to go for a short time. Sometimes it is helpful to ride to events in separate cars, so that the service member/veteran can leave if the need arises. It may also be helpful to develop a special signal or phrase to let the other person know you are ready to leave.

Issue #3: Returning service members/veterans may have an impaired ability to express emotions. In a war zone, emotional numbing often becomes a way of coping with the intensity of combat experiences. Emotional numbing may be a symptom of PTSD, depression, or substance abuse problems. Consequently, he or she may appear detached, cold or emotionally aloof.

Family Member Tip: Family members will feel better if they can see this emotional distance as part of the post OEF/OIF adjustment process rather than as a reflection of some sort of relationship problem or some wrongdoing on their parts.
**Issue #4:** On the other hand, some veterans show strong emotional displays and high levels of reactivity. For example, individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often have intense angry outbursts, which can be quite frightening for family members and other observers.

**Family Member Tip:** Family members can recognize the heightened emotionality as a symptom of the illness (PTSD) and try not to take it personally. However, regardless of mental health diagnosis, emotional or physical violence is never appropriate, and it is essential that family members seek appropriate support if this becomes an issue. For more information on referrals see the handouts from the Anger Management Module.

**Issue #5:** During the deployment, communication was limited and, if it took place, was not face-to-face.

**Family Member Tip:** While communication can be easier when face-to-face, it is also easier for emotions to escalate and intensify. Talk about strategies for reducing negative emotions or disengaging from each other when conversations become too intense.

**Issue #6:** OEF/OIF veterans find a number of different professional treatments helpful for dealing with relationship issues.

**Family Member Tip:** Be flexible in learning new communication skills and be willing to consider marital therapy, family education classes, and/or family therapy.

**Issue #7:** It is easy for families to get stuck in old, familiar patterns of communication. Some of these habits may be effective, but your family has changed and some may not work any longer.

**Family Member Tip:** Be willing to experiment and try out new ways of communicating to see what works best.

III. **Effective Communication**

**Provider Note:** Explain that in addition to specific communication tips related to the OEF/OIF deployment experience, there are some general communication skills that can be helpful in any relationship, and that the remainder of the class will focus on learning some of these skills.

**Discussion Question:**

- What are some important issues to remember in effective communication?

**Provider Note:** Distribute Handout 6: “Communicating With Your Loved One” and discuss/explain the following points to facilitate effective communication:

**DO’s**

1. “2 Sentence Rule.” Keep your communication simple, clear, and brief.
2. Ask only ONE question at a time.
3. Stick to the current issue rather than bringing up “old issues.”
4. Stay calm. People often become uncomfortable and withdrawn if you express intense emotions, especially anger.

5. Minimize other distractions by turning off cell phones, the television, the computer, video games, and music.

6. Pay attention to nonverbal behavior – both the message that you are sending with your body language and the verbal message and body language message of your family member. Sometimes those returning from combat struggle to identify and express their needs and feelings; consequently, focusing on their behavior and emotional state rather than just their words can be important. Sometimes the family member who's been "holding down the fort" has difficulty sharing their feelings and adjusting to having support again.

7. Help your loved one identify his/her feelings by suggesting several choices (e.g., are you feeling angry, sad, or worried right now?).

8. Acknowledge what you have heard him/her express. Show empathy or caring for his/her feelings. Remind each other that you are not alone and many people have had similar feelings. If appropriate, share a time when you felt the same way or talk about other people you know who have faced similar challenges.

9. Decide together on a regular time for communication. Even if you are together most of the time, families benefit from having a set time to routinely talk about delicate matters. Choosing a low-stress time when both of you are apt to feel at your best is important.

DON’Ts

1. Avoid giving advice unless asked – or if the person cannot make the decision on his/her own. Rather, make decisions together whenever possible.

2. Avoid interrupting each other.

3. Don’t talk down to each other (e.g., “you are acting like a child”).

4. Avoid name-calling.

5. Don’t generalize (“always” or “never”). Focus on the specific behavior rather than the individual.

6. Don’t yell or shout.

7. Don’t personalize each other's behavior. Recognize that the symptom may be part of the normal post-deployment adjustment and may have nothing to do with you.

8. Physical violence is never an acceptable way of dealing with conflict. If you or your family member is becoming violent, leave the situation and focus on regaining safety.

Provider Note: Ask for questions regarding this list of “do’s and don’ts.” If time allows, ask class members to share one specific tip they are going to try in the next week.
IV. Specific Skill and Role Play: “I” Statement

Provider Note: Explain that you are now going to focus on teaching a tool for expressing yourself in a way that can help reduce conflict and more clearly communicate your message, called the “I” statement.

A. Families can get entrenched in old, familiar patterns of communication. Some habits may be effective, whereas others may not work any longer.

B. An essential skill in relationships is learning how to give feedback (and express complaints) without criticizing your partner.

Today we’re going to teach you a specific tool for a direct communication called the “I” statement. This skill requires the speaker to take responsibility for his/her feelings and desires.

Write on Board: When you__________, I feel ________________, and I would really like ____________________.

C. The “I” statement can be used in a variety of situations such as:

1) To make a request
   • When you leave your cigarette burning, I feel…and I would like….

2) To give praise
   • When you give me a hug, I feel….and I would like….

3) To express negative feelings
   • When you threaten me, I feel… and I would like….

4) To ask the individual to change his/her behavior
   • When you burst in my room without knocking, I feel… and I would like….
   • When you sleep all day, I feel… and I would like….

D. The “I” statement has many advantages, including:

1) These messages get the listener’s attention. Individuals often become overly self-involved and may be unaware of the other person’s feelings.

2) These messages are non-blaming, so they minimize defensiveness.

3) These messages force the speaker to identify, express, and take responsibility for his/her own feelings.

E. In addition to thinking about the words you use, it’s also very important to pay attention to HOW you approach the other person. Leading in with an angry tone of voice, getting in the other person’s space, and jumping into “attack” mode will likely lead to an argument (even if you use the exact “I” message script!).

F. We recognize that using the “I” statement and approaching each other gently can be easier said than done. Therefore, it’s very important to practice these skills!
Provider Note: Distribute Handout 7: Practicing “I” Messages. Have participants get into dyads with the individuals they came with and complete the worksheet together. For participants who came alone, pair them with other participants who did not come with a family member, or complete the activity with them yourself. When participants are finished, return to the large group and discuss participants’ reactions. Encourage participants to practice these skills.

V. Specific Skill and Role Play: Softened Start-up Exercise

Provider Note: Pass out copies of Handout 8: “Softened Start-up” and introduce the activity with a story like this one: “My friend’s dad had a ’37 Ford Pickup with a very cantankerous 85 horsepower flat head engine. If you were not sensitive to and careful about the ‘start up’ (choke pulled out exactly ¾ inch, all power to accessories off, precisely three pumps of gas pedal, and transmission in neutral, etc.) – you were destined to walk. Similarly, thinking about how you start up your next conversation with your significant other is critical to success. Bouncing along at 40 mph beats walking any day!” You may substitute the details of this story with the first car you had in college or a friend’s car that was difficult to start.

Alternate lead-in: How you approach a sensitive horse you are about to saddle for the first time. OR, how you plan for a special meeting with your boss or supervisor about a sensitive topic.

All families have “touchy or sensitive” issues that need to be addressed. Research by Dr. John Gottman (2000) indicates that how we bring up these touchy/sensitive issues is critical. A hard, “in your face” start-up rarely succeeds. On the other hand a “soft start-up” frequently ends with a pleasant, successful resolution.

A. General rules for a softened start-up

1. Sandwich technique – begin and end with something pleasant.
2. Keep it short and simple (KISS).
3. Lead in sentence – complain don’t blame. This means stating what behavior you would like to be different without attacking the person.
4. Use “I feel _____ and I would appreciate if you….” instead of “You______.”
5. Describe what is happening – do not judge or blame.
6. Define clearly what it is you need.
7. Be respectful/polite – treat your significant other with at least the same consideration you’d give a roommate.
8. Don’t “gunny sack,” focus on the current issue – don’t bring up the fact that he/she forgot to pick up the kids after a soccer match three years ago
9. Sandwich technique – don’t forget to end with something pleasant.

Provider Note: After discussing the gentle communication guidelines above, lead your group in rewriting the hard start-ups in Handout 8 so that they are softer.
VI. **Wrap-Up**

- Ask if group members have any questions about the communication or issues discussed in today’s class. Discuss questions.
- Ask participants to choose one of the communication skills presented today and to practice it regularly this week.
- Have group members complete the evaluation and knowledge forms (Handouts D & E)
- Remind the group of the next group date and time, and pass out reminder cards.
Communicating with Your Loved One

DO’s:
1) “2 Sentence Rule.” Keep your communication simple, clear, and brief.
2) Ask only ONE question at a time.
3) Stick to the current issue rather than bringing up “old issues.”
4) Stay calm. Your spouse may become even more uncomfortable and withdrawn if you express intense emotions.
5) Minimize other distractions by turning off the television and radio.
6) Pay attention to nonverbal behavior – both the message that you are sending with your body language and the verbal message and body language message of your family member. Sometimes combat veterans struggle to identify and express their needs and feelings, so focusing on their behaviors and emotional states rather than just their words can be important.
7) Help your loved one identify his/her feelings by suggesting several choices (e.g., are you feeling angry, sad, or worried right now?).
8) Acknowledge what you have heard him/her express. Show empathy or caring for his/her feelings. You may wish to normalize that emotion and share a similar experience that you have had in the past.
9) Decide together on a regular time for communication. Even if you are together most of the time, families benefit from having a set time to routinely talk about delicate matters. Choosing a low-stress time when both of you are apt to feel at your best is important.

DON’Ts:
1) Avoid giving advice unless asked – or if the person cannot make the decision on his/her own. Rather, make decisions together whenever possible.
2) Avoid interrupting each other.
3) Don’t talk down to each other (e.g., “You are acting like a child!”).
4) Avoid name-calling.
5) Don’t generalize (“always” or “never”). Focus on the specific behavior rather than the individual.
6) Don’t yell or shout.
7) Don’t personalize the family member’s behavior. Recognize that the symptom may be part of the normal post OEF/OIF adjustment and may have nothing to do with you.
8) Do not allow or engage in physical violence.
HANDOUT 7

PRACTICING "I MESSAGES"

I MESSAGE: - Expressing Appreciation

WHEN YOU ______ I FEEL _________.

Example: When YOU give me a big hug, I FEEL happy, loved, and close to you.

1. When you say something nice to me, I feel __________________________
2. When I was sick and you fixed me dinner, I felt ______________________
3. When you listen to me when I'm upset, I feel _________________________
4. When you talk about our special memories, I feel ______________________
5. When you make dinner for me, I feel _________________________________
6. When you keep the house clean, I feel ________________________________
7. When you __________________________, I feel __________________________

I MESSAGE – Asking for Change

WHEN YOU ______ I FEEL _________.

IN THE FUTURE, I WOULD APPRECIATE: ________________________________

1. When you don't come home on time, I feel ____________________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

2. When you are rude to me in front of your friends, I feel __________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

3. When you clam up and won't talk, I feel ______________________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

4. When I'm talking to you and you turn on the TV, I feel __________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

5. When you yell at me, I feel _________________________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

6. When you criticize me, I feel _________________________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

7. When you ________________________, I feel __________________________
   In the future, I would appreciate _________________________________

Insert a feeling or emotion word(s), such as mad, sad, glad, afraid, surprised, excited, disgusted, hopeful, worried, etc.

Insert a feeling or emotion word(s)

Be specific!
**Softened Start-up**

*Background:* All families have “touchy or sensitive” issues that need to be addressed. Research by Dr. John Gottman (2000) indicates that how we bring up these touchy/sensitive issues is critical. A hard, “in your face start-up” rarely succeeds. On the other hand a “soft start-up” frequently ends with a pleasant, successful resolution.

The general rules for a softened start-up are the following:

1) Sandwich technique – begin and end with something pleasant.
2) Keep it short and simple (KISS).
3) Gentle lead-in sentence – explain your complaint and don’t blame.
4) Use the classic “I feel _____ and in the future I would appreciate_________” …instead of “You______.”
5) Describe what is happening – do not judge or blame.
6) Define clearly what it is you need.
7) Be respectful/polite – treat your significant other with at least the same consideration you’d give a roommate.
8) Don’t “gunny sack,” focus on the current issue – don’t bring up the fact that he/she forgot to pick up the kids after a soccer match two years ago.
9) Sandwich technique – don’t forget to end with something pleasant.

Practice these techniques by rewriting the following hard start-ups so that they are softer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guests</strong></td>
<td>Your significant other’s brother has been staying with you for over a month. Originally, he was to visit for two weeks. You are upset because he is eating you out of house and home and has not lifted a finger to help. You want your significant other to set some limits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hard start-up:**
“Your brother is a lazy, free-loading hog.”

**Your softened alternative:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Housework</strong></th>
<th>You wish your family member would help more around the house.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Hard start-up:**
“You are an unappreciative slob who expects me to be your mother! Ain’t happening!”

*Your softened alternative:*

________________________________________
________________________________________

**Parties**

You want to go to a party with your spouse. He/she is by nature shy and has become more withdrawn since coming back from Iraq. It is really important that your partner comes to this event with you, and you are upset that he/she does not want to.

*Hard start-up:*

“For once in your life, could you think about someone besides yourself? I’m really lonely and am sick of spending all my time sitting around here watching the grass grow. For once in our lives, could we please have a little fun?”

*Your softened alternative:*

________________________________________
________________________________________

**Sex**

It has been some time since you and your partner were last sexually intimate. You are wondering if your partner still finds you attractive. In your mind, making love tonight would be nice, very nice.

*Hard start-up:*

“Good grief! If you were any colder toward me – the furnace would kick on when you walk into the room. Do I have bad breath? Are you having an affair with the UPS person? Or what?”

*Your softened alternative:*

________________________________________
________________________________________

**Finances**

You want to save more money for your dream home. Your spouse likes to live more for the moment. Saving is less important to her/him.

*Hard start-up:*

“I can’t believe the crap you buy! How are we ever going to get ahead when you keep spending, spending, spending every penny we make!? Do you want to live in this cramped hovel for the rest of our lives?”

*Your softened alternative:*

________________________________________
________________________________________