

Why Don't They Say What They Mean?

Literal Communication in a World of Subtext

It happened again. I misunderstood.

“I wish I could start swimming, but I really don’t have the time,” a friend of mine told me. I immediately started brainstorming solutions. Maybe she could swim before work. Maybe weekends would work better. Only later did I realize she wasn’t asking for ideas. The conversation ended awkwardly when she said that she didn’t want to put on a bathing suit or get into a pool. I had interpreted her words literally. She expected me to understand something she never said. We were simply communicating in different ways.

Another example happened at home. I noticed my husband’s keys sitting on the kitchen counter instead of his dresser. I asked, “Did you mean to leave your keys here?” I meant exactly what I asked. What he heard was something completely different: “Why did you leave your keys here?” and “Don’t you know where they belong?” Neither of us intended to frustrate each other, yet we walked away with two different interpretations.

These missed connections can happen to anyone. For those of us who struggle with subtext and have ADHD, they can be especially frustrating.

Words Are Only Part of the Message

Communication involves much more than spoken words. Tone of voice, facial expressions, shared experiences, timing, and implied meaning all contribute to the message. In this article, I’ll use the word **subtext** to describe the implied meaning that listeners infer from context rather than from the literal words.

Many adults with ADHD describe themselves as preferring direct communication and sometimes have difficulty in finding subtext. Current research and qualitative studies suggest that differences in executive functioning, attention regulation, working memory, emotional regulation, and processing of social cues can all contribute to these experiences. They are common among many people with ADHD, although they are not universal. Repeated experiences of misunderstanding or feeling different can contribute to lower self-esteem for some people with ADHD and may affect relationships and social confidence.

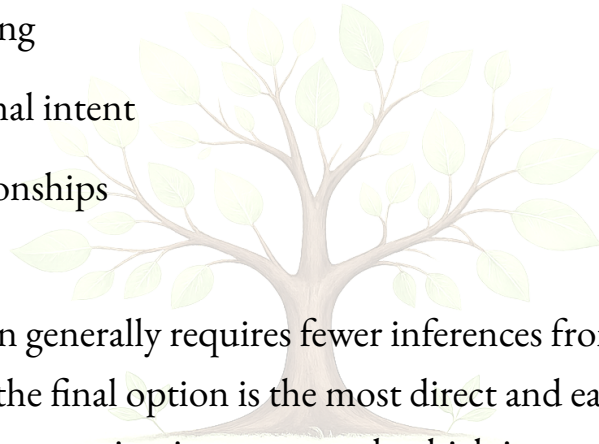
When one person communicates literally, and another relies more heavily on subtext, both people may leave the conversation believing they communicated clearly. They are not necessarily wrong. They are simply communicating in different ways.

Why Don't They Say What They Mean?

The first thing to remember is that people aren't trying to hide what they mean. There are unspoken rules of engagement that take place during a conversation. These rules, however, are based on an understanding that the listener will interpret both the words and the social context together. There is an assumption that people share enough background knowledge and experiences to understand the subtext.

An additional layer of meaning is communicated whenever a speaker uses subtext. Speakers will often use subtext the way some of us use emoticons. There is an intention behind the words that reshapes how the speaker wishes the message to be received. People use politeness and euphemisms for many reasons, including to:

- Avoid confrontation
- Avoid consequences
- Avoid hurting someone's feelings.
- Frame a request in a positive, non-aggressive way.
- Protect or raise reputation or status.
- Preserve dignity
- Ensure well-being
- Clarify emotional intent
- Maintain relationships

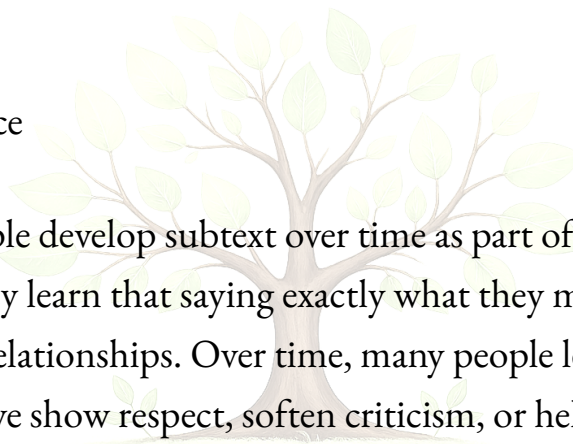


Direct communication generally requires fewer inferences from the listener. In the four examples below, the final option is the most direct and easy to understand. However, the most direct option is a command, which is perceived as aggressive or condescending.

1. The garbage pail is full.
2. Someone should take out the garbage.
3. Can you take out the garbage?
4. Take out the garbage.

How information is shared depends on context, and how the individuals participate in social interpretation, which can be affected by the following:

- Relationships
- Shared experiences
- Professional hierarchy
- Past experiences
- Background assumptions
- Negativity bias
- Social standing
- Power dynamics
- Identity prejudice

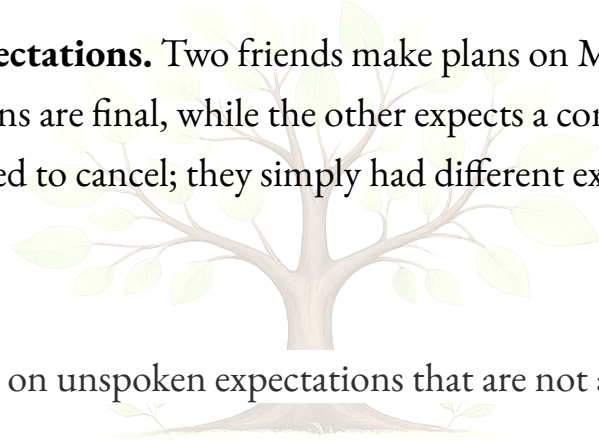


In many cultures, people develop subtext over time as part of living within families and communities. They learn that saying exactly what they mean isn't always the best way to maintain relationships. Over time, many people learn to communicate in ways that they believe show respect, soften criticism, or help them navigate social situations. As a result, many conversations contain layers of meaning beyond literal words.

At Home and in Close Relationships

Communication differences are often most noticeable in social interactions, which can lead others to misinterpret intentions or competence.

- **Misinterpreting Intent.** Someone who says, “The garbage should go out soon,” may simply be making an observation, or asking someone else to take immediate action. A more direct statement is helpful, such as “Please take out the garbage tonight.”
- **Direct Conversation vs. Subtext.** Some people appreciate direct communication. Others soften requests or opinions to avoid conflicts and hurt feelings. Someone asked their friend if they wanted to go to a concert. The friend responded, “I can go.” They didn’t answer the direct question. The person wonders if the other person really wants to go.
- **Different Expectations.** Two friends make plans on Monday. One assumes the plans are final, while the other expects a confirmation text. Neither intended to cancel; they simply had different expectations.



With Friends

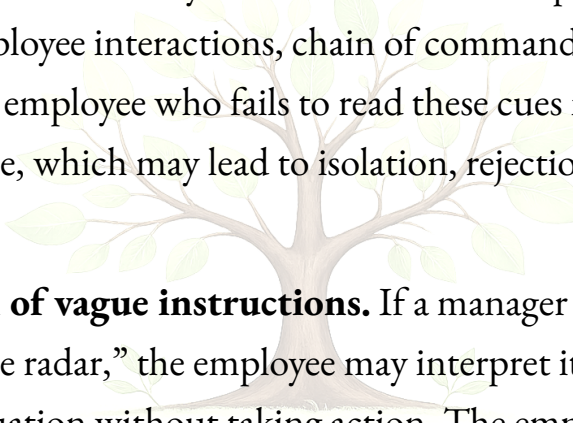
Friendships often rely on unspoken expectations that are not always obvious.

- **Missing subtle social cues.** People don’t always realize when someone isn’t interested in a conversation and is just being polite. The listener may enjoy watching Star Trek, but have no interest in Klingon grammar. Notice facial expressions and body language. Are they looking around the room? Are their bodies turned away from you? Are they checking their watch?
- **Violating unspoken boundaries.** I have known people who take common expressions literally, such as “Stop by at any time,” and drop by for a visit late at night. It is a good idea to think about the possible intentions behind the words.
- **Verbal processors.** Some people process their thoughts out loud. Strong statements made in the moment often reflect emotions rather than final

decisions. Give them a chance to talk through their emotions and ask questions before assuming they will do something.

In the Workplace

Many workplaces rely on unwritten expectations that are never explained directly. Misinterpretations and conflicting communication styles may lead to a perception of someone as combative, disrespectful, or intense.

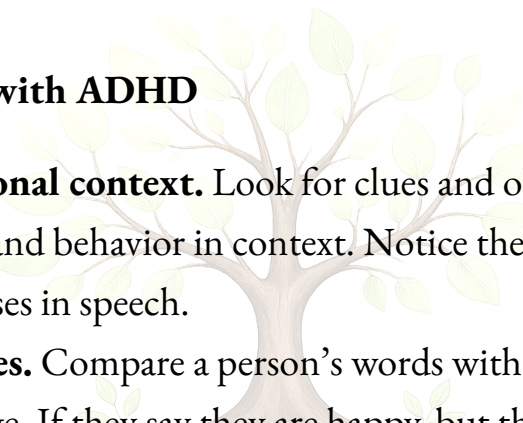
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- **The Hidden Culture.** Every office has unwritten expectations regarding dress codes, employee interactions, chain of command, and even parking and seating. An employee who fails to read these cues may not fit into the company culture, which may lead to isolation, rejection, or even disciplinary action.
 - **Interpretation of vague instructions.** If a manager tells an employee to “keep this on the radar,” the employee may interpret it as continuing to monitor the situation without taking action. The employee may not understand implied urgency, which can lead to a perceived lack of initiative.
 - **Difficulty with Ambiguous Instructions.** My former boss once told me, “Get me on a 6:00 flight to Atlanta.” I booked exactly what she requested. She was upset because she actually would have preferred an earlier flight on her usual airline. I did exactly what she asked, but not what she intended.
 - **Focus on Details.** Someone may over-explain details in a meeting, delving into specifics beyond what is warranted. This is an area where visual cues are crucial. Are your colleagues facing you and making eye contact, or are they looking around with restless bodies?

Even when two people communicate in good faith, conversations can end in confusion, and both may begin to question each other's intentions. Over time, these misunderstandings can create frustration, self-doubt, or distance in relationships.

Bridging the Gap

Communication is a shared responsibility. People with ADHD can develop strategies for recognizing subtext, while family members, managers, and coworkers can make their communication more direct and explicit.

Strategies for people with ADHD

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- **Look for additional context.** Look for clues and observe what others are doing to understand behavior in context. Notice the raised eyebrows, tone of voice, and pauses in speech.
 - **Look for matches.** Compare a person's words with their physical behavior and body language. If they say they are happy, but their body looks tense, their words do not match their meaning. If someone says they might do something but doesn't, follow their actions, not their words.
 - **Find a social guide.** A trusted friend, colleague, or coach can help interpret confusing situations. Review your interpretations after a meeting or event with them to see if you missed any implied meanings.
 - **Observe context and physical space.** Pay attention to the unwritten rules regarding organizational communications, seating, parking, and attire for different settings. Notice physical distance and whether someone backs away or leans back, which indicates discomfort.

Strategies for Managers and Coworkers

- **Provide clear, direct instructions.** Avoid vague or ambiguous requests like “Let’s look into upgrading our software system sometime soon.” Provide concrete, specific, and actionable tasks.
- **Use written summaries.** Follow up on verbal instructions and meetings with clear written summaries of key tasks that provide a concrete reference to prevent misinterpretation.
- **Encourage clarifying dialogue.** Foster an environment where asking questions is encouraged rather than judged.
- **Educate Teams.** Train teams on differences in communication and cognitive styles, including impulsive speech and neurodivergent thinking, to encourage colleagues to recognize a diverse community, rather than personality flaws or a lack of respect.

Strategies for Partners and Family

- **Use visual tools.** Provide written or visual lists of tasks. Seeing information helps with processing, without the disconnect between literal and intended meaning.
- **Practice Directness.** Use a direct communication style where you say exactly what you mean. This helps people with ADHD avoid having to decipher your needs.
- **Use Joint Problem Solving.** View communication differences as logistical challenges that you will conquer together, rather than as a reflection of the intentions and feelings of each other.

Utilizing Peer and Online Support

- **Communities.** Online communities offer specific coping skills and strategies. Remember to fact-check symptoms or medical information.
- **Language.** Learn terms like “executive dysfunction” and “rejection sensitivity dysphoria,” which give language to explain experiences more clearly.
- **Validation.** Sharing experiences with others creates an empowering community of shared experiences and wisdom.
- **Authenticity.** Many with ADHD find it refreshing to communicate with others who share similar direct styles, reducing the need for masking and saving mental energy.

Communication is a shared responsibility. Working together in a collaborative environment that values diverse communication styles replaces assumptions with understanding. This provides a space for conversations where everyone can be heard.

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