

Magic Interaction Skills.....OARS

To Repair & Enhance Connections with Others

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To most, our connections with others such as our partners, family, friends, and work colleagues, is bedrock to the quality and joy in our lives.

Sometimes these connections are very challenging, bringing hurt rather than joy into our lives, and sometimes regretted disconnections occur with important others, including people we love.

Repairing these disconnections is sometimes easier said than done – after all, we only control our side of any relationship. Others control their side, and on some occasions, they choose to remain disconnected, no matter how good our efforts are to repair the connection.

Fortunately, this is not the case most of the time, although many relationship repairs are difficult. But all is not lost as there are some magic interaction skills, called OARS, that you can learn to apply in any difficult interactions you have with others, which psychological research shows can repair and improve your connections. These skills are outlined shortly. But first an important foreword about flooding.

Flooding

Anxiety (really) sucks! Beware - when we get emotionally flooded with anxiety (ie overwhelmed), our greatest asset, our thinking brain, gets switched off and our emotional brain takes over the driving. Chances are we will get flooded when trying to repair or improve broken relationships. When that happens, we often become defensive which causes accidents, sometimes leading us to behave in impulsive, sometimes, regretted ways, that hurt our connections with others.

During flooding our thinking becomes foggy, and we are rarely able to continue to be our best selves, let alone remember to use skills like these OARS.

So, how do we reduce this potential defect of flooding during these interactions? There are two practices I'd like to share to help you avoid the impact of flooding during your interactions with others, especially interactions we know are likely to be difficult.

The first practice is recommended by the world's peak relationship body, The Gottman Institute - that we adopt a **soft and gentle start-up** to these more meaningful difficult conversations.

Soft and gentle start up is a challenge to many of us who are used to being harsh, almost barking at others, putting them on notice that we really mean business. Harsh start-ups simply get people's defences up, which will undermine most meaningful conversations. To illustrate, think about how our emergency service people handle incredibly difficult conversations, like when they inform family deaths to relatives - it's often handled by them with abundant care, sensitivity, and concern.

I find it helpful to prep for difficult conversations, not do them off-the-cuff. And this includes reminding myself that the other person is someone important to me, whom I value (may even love) and they deserve my most respectful approach. It helps me to also remember that everyone of us is keen to live happy lives, and I believe every one of us is trying our best to do just that, albeit we don't all agree on "how". Most of us do struggle 'sometimes' being our best selves.

Here is an example of a soft start up for your consideration: "Hi. I'd really like to have a chat with you about something that's important to me. Is now, okay? I have been feeling very anxious about the disagreement we had last week. I have been upset ever since and I find it hard to stop worrying about it. I need to talk more about it with you".

The format of this example mirrors the Gottman Institute "I-Statement" format for creating a soft gentle start-up - "I feel.....About.....I need".

The second practice is to recognise that whenever one is flooded, this will be the worst moment for handling difficult interactions – SO DON'T! Instead, take time to defuse the flooding first.

It is recommended to defuse the flooding by stepping back, wait a little time, and take this TIME-OUT to help you calm, during which:

- Try a few minutes of slow even deep breathing and/or muscle relaxation (use the free "Smiling Mind" App to learn these techniques),
- Reduce the body's temperature (e.g. drink cold water, place wrists under cold water),
- Exercise, like going for a walk, and
- Focus your mind's attention on one soothing, comforting image (e.g. your safe calm place)

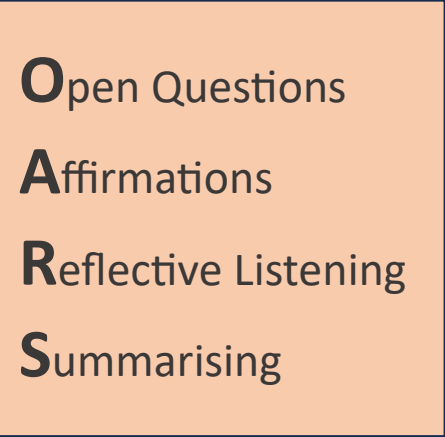
For how long should one take time-out? Cooling down like this is recommended only as a temporary strategy – doing so long-term is avoidance, which is one of our greatest barriers to growing happier, healthier relationships. Gottman Institute suggests to take about 20 minutes to calm, but whilst this is a good rule of thumb, my recommendation is that you take whatever time you need to recover calmness, and when you no longer feel flooded, re-engage in the difficult interaction.

So, what are the magic interaction skills to use when we re-engage in difficult interactions? There are multiple very good practical psychology-grounded communication models that will help us navigate difficult conversations with others. The one I'd like to recommend to you is called OARS.

OARS Model

OARS is a valuable communication tool to learn.

OARS was originally developed for use by people in the helping professions - psychologists, social workers, teachers. It teaches how to be a good listener - it prioritises listening over talking (reminding us why we are given two ears but only one mouth 😊). Asking the right questions, showing empathy, and making the other person feel heard and understood - skills that will dramatically improve closeness in any relationship and the key to re-establishing a more comfortable and TRUSTING relationship.



Open Questions
Affirmations
Reflective Listening
Summarising

OARS is an acronym - the letters stand for the four interaction skills noted in the diagram above. Let's have a closer look at each of these four skills and how they help navigate difficult interactions.

(O) Open Questions:

OPEN QUESTIONS invite the other person to elaborate on what they mean, to give their perspective and feelings on an issue, to open them up, to vent. The benefits? You will learn a lot more about the other person. And you will gain more information, clarity on what matters to them, and why. It also encourages them to talk which will help calm and defuse tensions they may be feeling, following which they will interact with you better.

The opposite of OPEN QUESTIONS are closed questions, sometimes called fact-gathering questions, which tend to invite the other person to provide short answers, like saying “yes” or “no”. These questions will naturally close-down the conversation. Closed questions are useful in some situations, especially when you just want facts or when time is limited, but rarely helpful when re-building connections with others is the priority. So, any time you want to open-up a conversation with others, try asking them OPEN QUESTIONS.

So, what is an OPEN QUESTION? Here are examples of both types of questions:

- A Closed Question: Did you take the train to work today?
- An Open Questions: Tell me about your journey to work this morning?

To the first question, the other person can respond by saying as little as “yes” or “no” if they want to, especially if they don’t really want to open-up and talk. The second question however is an invitation to talk, asking them to provide more information than simply “yes” or “no”. When we are in conflict with others, the anxiety felt often leads humans to avoid the conflict, sometimes by talking as little as possible – so, one antidote to help you open-up these conversations is to ask OPEN QUESTIONS.

A useful tip in doing this is to notice that the words we use to start our questions mostly sets up whether the question is closed or open.

Closed questions usually start with the following words: Do, Did, Does, Have, When, How long, or Is it.

Open question usually start with the following words: Tell me about? Explain? Describe? Why? What do you think? How do you feel?

Here are some examples of open questions for you to try, and to practice

- Tell me what are your concerns
- What’s happened that has made you upset with me?
- Help me understand?
- How would you like things to be different?
- What would you like to ask of me?
- What’s been happening since we last chatted?
- What makes you think it might be time for a change?
- Tell me more about how you are seeing this situation.
- What do you want us to do differently?
- Tell me about the time when this problem began.
- What’s different for you this time?
- What are your choices as you view them?
- Tell me more about this.

(A) Affirmation:

An AFFIRMATION is finding something positive to comment about the other person. It could be to comment on their effort, or a strength or ability they have. It must of course be genuine – most people quickly sense fake. When you take the opportunity to affirm others, it helps them feel both positive and calm so they can engage better.

Here are some example affirmations for you to try, and to practice.

- You are really trying hard
- What you say matters to me
- That sounds scary
- I respect you
- I would have had trouble coping with that
- I'd feel the same way in the exact same circumstances
- I appreciate your openness and honesty
- I like the way you said that
- Thanks for calling me today
- You sound very determined to make change in your life
- I appreciate your efforts despite the discomfort you're feeling
- It sounds like you have been really thoughtful about this
- Thank you for all your hard work
- Despite the difficulties, you're still willing to tr
- You clearly are a resilient person
- You handled yourself really well in that situation
- That's a great idea
- That's a great suggestion
- I appreciate your openness today
- I appreciate that was very hard to tell me
- It took a lot of courage to do that
- I like the way you said that
- You handled yourself really well in that situation
- If I were in your shoes, I don't know if I could have managed nearly so well
- I've enjoyed talking with you today

(R) Reflective Listening:

REFLECTIVE LISTENING is the primary skill used to demonstrate empathy, interest and understanding - Brene Brown reminds us that empathy is what fuels our connection with others².

REFLECTIVE LISTENING begins with an interest in what the other person is saying and a desire to truly understand how that person sees things.

Your goal here is to listen carefully to the other person and to then demonstrate that you understand their perspective. And, after the other person has responded to your open questions and told you a bit about their side of things, and before you put forward your own perspectives or issues, take a little time to summarise back (i.e. feedback) to them, in your own words, what you heard them say about three things:

1. Their Content - The facts of what they said
2. Their Feeling - The emotion you sense they're feeling (eg. anger, sadness, embarrassed, hurt, etc)
3. Their Meaning – Your sense of why this is important to them (what it means to them).

Remember, our emotions only get hurt by things that matter to us, that are important to us. So, when emotion boils in you and in others, take a moment to try to understand what it is that is important to each of us that is in question, that perhaps feels under attack.

Of course, few of us are experts at naming emotions and their meanings, particularly that others are feeling³. But trying to do this in a summary gives the other person the chance to let us know if we have an accurate understanding, and, if not, to then tweak our understanding. And refining understandings is what builds empathy, which re-builds and grows relationships.

Here are some examples of reflective listening summaries:

- “I hear you saying... (CONTENT).....and it makes sense to me why you would feel...(EMOTION) because...(MEANING)”
- “So, you’re telling me that you had a fight with your manager (CONTENT), and this has made you quite angry (EMOTION), as he does not understand you want to get back to work but are in a lot of pain (MEANING). Tell me more about.....(Open Question)
- “As you told me that story about Dad (CONTENT), I noticed sadness appear with some tears in your eyes (EMOTION) and I now understand how important this is to your connection with him (MEANING)”

(S) Summarising:

Most often when we interact with others, the common conversation pattern is to add our comments on top of, after someone else’s comment. In OARS however, a SUMMARY is different. OARS teaches us to listen to the other person and then summarise, using our own words, what the other person said, before we add our own comments.

SUMMARISING has several helpful communication benefits, including:

- It slows the conversation down, which can be especially helpful when flooding occurs,
- We get to check if our understanding of what the other said is accurate, which helps us ensure we are both on the same page before moving on,
- It shows we are listening carefully which the other person will find validating, and
- it helps to maintain conversation focus.

SUMMARIES are usually brief three to four sentences. They can be used throughout the conversation, as well as a good way to finish the conversation. Here are some Summary examples:

- Before I provide you with my thoughts on this, let me summarize what you’ve told me so far, and see if I’ve missed anything important....Is there anything else that you would like to add before we move on?
- So, you’ve expressed concern about our relationship, your finances, family, saving money, and providing a stable living environment for your family. Is that correct?
- Let me see if I understand so far...
- Here’s what I’ve heard. Tell me if I’ve missed anything.
- Let me make sure I understand exactly what you’ve been trying to tell me...
- What you said is important. I value what you say. Here are the salient points.
- We covered that well. Let’s talk about...

An OARS Exercise To Try

There are plenty of good videos on YouTube to watch people demonstrating how to do each OARS skill. After watching others, I suggest you have a go yourself. Perhaps ask a trusted friend/partner to join you in brief chat sessions, where they are the speaker and you, their listener. Your job is to use only OARS skills throughout that conversation – do not offer advice, nor your opinion. Perhaps record the chat on a smart phone, count each OARS you use, and review if you could have done anything better.

You can make up your own difficult conversation scenarios, but here are a few to get you started:

- Your sibling is angry and has decided not to talk with you, so you ring her/him to try and repair it,
- Your boss is very quiet today, and you are worrying if you have done anything wrong,
- Your mum forgot to contact you on an important family anniversary,
- Your partner came home late and the dinner you prepared was ruined,
- Your housemate is not doing their fair share of housework,
- You are aware and concerned that your 14-year-old is abusing alcohol/marijuana
- Make up your own scenario.....

And finally.....

You might then ask, how do you put in your own ‘two-bobs worth’ into difficult conversations. Well, “carefully” is my response. Of course, you have every right to assert your own thoughts. All I suggest in that respect, is that you re-read the paragraphs above about soft and gentle start up. Often its not WHAT we say but HOW we say it that makes or breaks our conversations with others.

So, open questions and reflective listening are key skills in effective communication, especially when we are having a difficult conversation and we or the people we are interacting with are emotionally charged, such as angered or sad. Stopping yourself from over-reacting to someone else when you are triggered with strong emotions is hard, but it is important that you remain calm (and take time out if you get flooded) and avoid becoming defensive and counter-attacking, which will likely only inflame the situation.

Using your OARS greatly helps to move relationships forward. With practice, OARS will become second nature.

Below are some suggestions on resources for further learning:

1. YouTube video by PsychWire titled “What does the acronym OARS mean...”
2. YouTube video: “Brene Brown on Empathy” (3 minutes)
3. Read “Atlas of the Heart” by Brene Brown - helps us more clearly notice and label our emotions

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