



STOP WAIT go

In *National Geographic* many years ago there was a photo of a polar bear and a dog playing together. A dog named Churchill was tied up to a stake in the ice. His owner spotted a starving bear, just out of hibernation, through the window of his cabin. He watched in horror as the bear approached his dog. Feeling powerless to protect his pet from certain death, he grabbed his camera and snapped pictures of the scene unfolding before his eyes. But to his amazement, what he witnessed was how Churchill saved his own life.

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The hardest part of communicating well is knowing when to speak, when to be quiet, and when to wait and see. Communication trainer **Susan Chapman** shows us how mindfulness can help.

As the bear lumbered towards him, Churchill crouched down and wagged his tail. In spite of his ravenous hunger, the bear responded to the signal and switched from predator to playmate. One of the photos shows Churchill and the bear embraced in an affectionate hug as they tumbled and rolled around the ice. Then the huge polar bear turned and ambled away. Over the next few days, the bear returned to the site several times to play with his new friend.

These photos came into my life at the right moment. I was preparing to teach a series of workshops on mindful communication, where students would learn practical skills in bringing awareness, insight, compassion,

and choice to their communications. In preparation, I was paying close attention to my own interactions, especially with the difficult people in my life.

FROM PREDATOR TO PLAYMATE

When I first saw the *National Geographic* photos, I was observing the defensive strategies I used with the hungry bears in my life. Would Robert, the bully co-worker coming down the hallway, turn into a teddy bear if I adjusted the signals I was sending? Not likely. But I decided to give tail wagging a try anyway.

In some ways, Robert fit the image of a starving polar bear, as he stalked the office commanding attention and emotionally devouring the rest of us with his crude jokes and predictable opinions. Normally, when he walked into the room I cringed and put on my mask, which only locked the two of us into another episode of our predator-prey relationship.

But when I realized I could arouse a feeling of friendliness rather than cower,

TRAFFIC LIGHTS

Bringing awareness to the way we communicate with others has both practical and profound applications. During an important business meeting, or in the middle of a painful argument with our partner, we can train ourselves to recognize when the channel of communication has shut down. We can train ourselves to remain silent instead of blurting out something we'll later regret. We can notice when we're over-reacting and take a time-out.

We begin practicing mindful communication by simply paying attention to how we open up when we feel emotionally safe, and how we shut down when we feel afraid. Just noticing these patterns without judging them starts to cultivate mindfulness in our communications. Noticing how we open and close puts us in greater control of our conversations.

In my mindful communication workshops, the metaphor we use is the changing traffic light. We imagine that when the channel of communication

PRACTICING MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

I felt a wave of confidence. Over the following days and weeks, I discovered that I could interrupt my defensive reactions to Robert by bringing up the mental image of Churchill and the polar bear. This interruption in my defensiveness allowed me to relax for a moment.

As Robert came more into focus for me, positive details about him started to emerge. I appreciated the fact that he was always on time for work, even though his eyes looked tired and swollen, as if he'd been up too late the night before. I noticed that he had good taste in clothes and that his shirts were always clean and ironed. Gradually, I formed a more respectful image of Robert and my fear of him lessened significantly.



RED LIGHT

Notice when you've become defensive and closed off. Be careful. Communicating in this zone can lead to difficult and painful reactions.



YELLOW LIGHT

Pay attention to the limbo between open and closed. Relax with the uncertainty. Pause, reflect, linger there, and let possibilities emerge.



GREEN LIGHT

When your state of mind is open, feel free to explore your connection with others. Share. Learn. Change. Expand.

closes down, the light has turned red. When communication feels open again, we say the light has turned green. When communication feels in-between, or on the verge of closing down, we say the light has turned yellow. The changing traffic light imagery helps us to identify our various states of communication, and to recognize the consequences of each.

THE RED LIGHT: DEFENSIVE REACTIONS

When I let Robert intimidate me, my red light came on. I became defensive and closed down. When we react to fear by shutting down the channel of communication, we've put up a defensive barrier dividing us from the world. We justify our defensiveness by holding on to unexamined opinions about how right we are. We tell ourselves that relationships are not that important. We undervalue other people and put

tion patterns helps us realize the value of openness. Generally, we associate open people as trustworthy, as in touch with themselves and others. But openness also has the magic ingredient that enables us to fall in love, to feel empathy and courage. When we're open, we let go of our opinions and enter a larger mind, which gives us the power to trust our instincts, like Churchill trusted his instincts to wag his tail.

When we're open, we don't see our individual needs opposing the needs of others. We experience a *we-first* state of mind, because we appreciate that our personal survival depends on the well-being of our relationships. We express this connectedness to others through open communication patterns. Open communication tunes us in to whatever is going on

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our self-interest first. In short, our values shift to *me-first*. Closed communication patterns are controlling and mistrustful. Others become static objects only important to us if they meet our needs.

To make matters worse, when we're closed and defensive, we feel emotionally hungry. We look to others to rescue us from aloneness. We might try to manipulate and control them to get what we need. Because these strategies never really work, we inevitably become disappointed with people. We suffer, and we cause others to suffer.

We're all born with sensitive receptors in our body, heart, and mind that keep us tuned into the flow of energy and life going on around us and within us. This natural communication system feeds us information all the time. When we close down and become defensive—for a few minutes, a few days, a few months, or even a lifetime—we're cutting ourselves off not only from others, but also from our natural ability to communicate. Mindful communication trains us to notice when we've stopped using our innate communication wisdom—the red light.

THE GREEN LIGHT: OPENNESS

When I could open up and reconnect with my own resources, and to Robert as a playmate, my green light came on. Paying attention to our communica-

in the present moment, whether comfortable or not. Openness is heartfelt, willing to share the joy and pain of others. Because we're not blocked by our own opinions, our conversations with others explore new worlds of experience. We learn, change, and expand.

THE YELLOW LIGHT: IN-BETWEEN

When my defensive reactions to Robert became so painful that I began to be curious about them, my yellow light came on. In practicing mindful communication, eventually we ask ourselves: *What exactly causes me to switch from open to closed and then open again?* We begin to discover the state of mind that exists in-between open and closed—symbolized by the yellow light. In-between is a place we normally don't want to enter. We find ourselves there when the ground falls out from beneath our feet, when we feel surprised, embarrassed, disappointed—on the verge of shutting down. We might feel a sudden loss of trust, an unexpected flash of self-consciousness. Learning to hold steady and be curious at this juncture is critical to the practice of mindful conversation. Horseback riding instructors call it “holding your seat.”

A yellow-light transition can appear any time. We can switch from closed to open via the yellow light, if we're willing to enter into curiosity, or accepting that we don't know the answer. For instance, one day,

during an argument with my husband, I stormed out the door and was halfway around the block when, out of nowhere, I asked myself: Why am I doing this? I didn't know the answer and despite my pain, I was curious. Suddenly, I was outside the defensive security of my red light, open to any and all possibilities.

The in-between state of mind is a critical time for bringing peace into our homes and workplaces. Small acts of kindness that are either shared or withheld when the yellow light is flashing can make or break a relationship. Once we're in the red zone, it's too late to engage in acts of kindness—we're too mistrustful. I've seen this over and over again working with couples—they reach a critical point when they can save their relationship by switching from me-first to we-first thinking. They can think about their children, pets, or anything that brings a larger picture to mind. Acts of kindness at this point shift them into a temporary mood of gratitude. Feeling gratitude makes them more interested in moving forward.

The yellow light points to those miraculous moments when we can open up, wag our tails, and play. We break the spell of our own personal agendas and awaken to genuine relationship. Such abrupt shifts seem to come out of nowhere in the middle of our most ego-crunching experiences—such as admitting that we've made a mistake.

When I think back to the early years and the arguments I'd have with my husband, I realize that the timeline of our 21-year marriage has been a series of turning points. At these turning points the path of our relationship could have led toward heaven or hell. Our happiness is the result of thousands of small flashes of the yellow light, where we were able to transform disappointments and arguments into opportunities for unmasking, intimacy, and joy. 