

Communication Skills

Individual clients grappling with overwhelming anxiety, and couples caught in patterns of conflict, have often found it useful to learn a structured approach to expressing their thoughts and feelings to others, while also reducing the risk of the encounter ending up in an unmanageable conflict.

I distinguish between **confrontation** (to cause to meet, to bring face-to-face, to encounter) and **conflict** (to contend in warfare, to be opposed to, to fail to find agreement). If properly done, confrontation is often necessary and can be helpful; conflict is seldom necessary and can be hurtful.

I teach clients a simple 4-stage approach to productive confrontation. After learning the basics we have fun practicing to apply it through role-plays and simulated encounters. We learn to operate well in the **orange** zone of emotions, more intense than calm **green** but short of conflictual **red**.

Step 1 is called the **Clock** – a reminder to start gently, and to check with the other person that the timing of the encounter suits them. We learn particular words and phrases to help with this. And we remember that it's almost always a bad time when one or other is hungry, angry, lonely or tired.

Step 2 is called the **Flower** – a reminder to lead by explaining our own feelings. Here too, we learn specific words and phrases that help us do this well. We also increase our vocabulary of feelings-words. And as far as possible we avoid the accusing-type words of “you”, “always” and “never”.

Step 3 is called the **Tennis** – an explicit assurance to the other person that we're not attacking them, just raising an issue that we need to deal with together, for the good of the relationship. We learn how to remind ourselves and the other person, that we're doubles partners, not competitive singles.

Step 4 is called the **Monkey** – the moment when we get the issue off our own back, using a few key words and phrases, and invite the other person to suggest ways to address the issue. We learn that before jumping in with our own desired solutions, stopping and listening is extremely powerful.

As part of training couples and individual clients in these skills, I also cover what to do when feelings get too intense in the middle of an encounter or when the approach seems to be breaking down, and how to use it with children, friends and colleagues to enhance the outcome for all involved.

End.