Contemporary Media Forum

Interpersonal Guidelines for Texting

Text communication has become ubiquitous in contemporary culture, whether it occurs via email, cell phones, or online discussion boards and social networks. More so than ever in history, people rely on texting to converse with colleagues, friends, family, and lovers, as well as to form new relationships that might never progress to a face-to-face encounter. As we become more experienced with these text relationships, we discover unique challenges that require new interpersonal sensitivities and skills.

The most problematic scenarios in texting often revolve around the inherent ambiguity in this type of communication. We cannot see and hear the other person, which deprives us of the visual and auditory cues of facial expression, body language, and voice dynamics that convey emotion and meaning. Texting also occurs in a flexible temporal zone that might involve relatively slow "asynchronous" exchanges over the course of days, weeks, or months, as well as much quicker "synchronous" connections that approximate face-to-face verbal dialogue.

These unique qualities of texting create an unusual type of intersubjective space where primary process thinking and unconscious needs, emotions, and transference reactions have a greater influence over interpersonal perceptions and behavior. When discussing these challenges with people who consult me about online relationships, I often find myself referring to a set of guidelines that help minimize problematic texting scenarios – what I like to call my list of Top Ten Texting Tips:

1. Be clear and concise

Effective texting means effective writing. Try to be as clear and specific as you can in what you type in order to avoid ambiguities that encourage misunderstandings and possible transference reactions. Also avoid long unbroken blocks of text that resemble free associations, especially when those associations lead to the expression of thoughts and feelings that are better off suppressed. No one enjoys rummaging through someone else's rambling ruminations, as if they are peeking inside the person's private intrapsychic world.

2. Balance formality and casual spontaneity

The less you know a person, the more traditional your writing should be, i.e. reasonable grammar and punctuation. Save spontaneous, creative, carefree texting for people who know you well. In fact, natural transitions to that kind of texting usually indicates increased familiarity and intimacy.

3. Provide a context

People will interpret a text message based on the situation in which you are sending it. Do not keep them guessing – and possibly encourage them to project their anxieties – about where you are or what you are doing at the moment you send it, especially if it is an important message and the situation around you is affecting what you are saying.

4. Beware of the "Online Disinhibition Effect"

People in general tend to be disinhibited in text communication because they cannot see each other, they can send a message then "run away," and they might start to experience the message as an extension of their own intra-psychic space, where they feel free to think anything – all of which are ingredients of the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004a, 2004b). Double-check yourself. Are you going overboard and getting a bit too loose in what you are saying? Are you depersonalizing your texting partner? Remember that it is a real live person reading your message. Empathically anticipate how that person might react.

5. Avoid sarcasm

For people to appreciate your sarcastic comment that you intend as good-natured fun, they might need to hear your voice and see your face. It is very easy to misinterpret a sarcastic text message as critical and unfriendly, especially if unconscious motivations behind the comment are indeed hostile. Avoid it, unless the person knows you well and appreciates sarcasm.

6. Think about pacing and no replies

Text pacing can be slow or fast, over the course of many days or as quickly spontaneous as talking in the moment. Fast exchanges might be a way of saying "I want to be with you now." Slow responses might suggest, "I want to think about this some more, or even avoid you." But do not make too much of changes in pacing. It might not mean anything important about the relationship. In particular, be aware of the no-reply. If a person has not responded to your message, you might find your projections and transference reactions getting the

best of you, perhaps for no valid reason. And remember that if you do not reply in a reasonable amount of time to your texting companions, especially to important messages they sent, you might be stirring up their projections and transference reactions.

7. Assume good will

If you are not sure about what a person really means in a message, do not jump to conclusions based on your own projections and transference tendencies. Firing off an emotional reply based on what you think the person meant can lead to mire of misunderstandings and conflict stemming from transference/countertransference dynamics. Assume good will. What goes around comes around, so if you act positive, there is a very good chance that is what you will get in return.

8. Sleep on it

If you are unsure about a message someone sent you or one you are thinking of sending, sleep on it. Read the message tomorrow. You will see it with a fresh, more objective eye. We interpret text messages based on how we feel at the moment. Tomorrow, after a good nights sleep, situational projections and transference reactions might have subsided.

9. Read it out loud

This might sound silly, but if you cannot quite get a grip on what a person intended in a message, or you are unsure of how your own message sounds, read it out loud. Read it out loud with different speeds, inflections, and tones of voice. You will see that there are many different ways to "hear" a message, with some of them based on introjected voices from the past. Being aware of these different voices will help you read and write messages more effectively.

10. Know the value of being face-to-face

Texting can be convenient and effective, but some things should be said in-person. Most of the time (but not necessarily all of the time) face-to-face discussions are considered more personal and intimate. Being in-person is a physical commitment to someone. It took time and effort to be there with him or her. They know that. Save important questions, discussions, and self-disclosures for that in-person conversation. If possible, avoid the weak-in-the-knees strategy of confronting people via texting. And if you want people to truly appreciate the value of your being with them, avoid texting someone else in the middle of your conversation. No one likes his or her "real" presence playing second fiddle to the more intangible digital presence of someone else miles away.

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