

## ***Coping with College Series***

### ***Relating and Dating: Communication Skills*** ***Cynthia Fuller, Staff Counselor***

So, it's October and you've settled into the academic swing for the semester. How are you doing in the relating and dating department? Do you have one or more friends on campus? Are you in a dating relationship? Scanning your prospects? Afraid to take the first step and ask someone out? Recovering from a breakup? Pretending it doesn't really matter anyway? It doesn't take a Ph.D. in psychology to see that relationships have a really big impact on our general well being. Or that the whole relationship thing can be challenging. This article is meant to open some doors or windows in the way you communicate with the important people in your life.

In any relationship, communication can rather easily stray into choppy waters. For example: Sal says to Amy *"You never showed up-where were you yesterday?! I waited for you for 35 minutes and I almost missed my 3:00 class!"* Amy, angered by the tone Sal has taken says, *"For heaven's sake Sal, lighten up, it's not a crime to run a little late!"* Sal responds *"yeah, but Amy you are always 'running a little late'!"* This brief but heated exchange could turn into a substantial rift in the relationship. Why?

First, Sal starts the conversation with an accusation, which pretty much guarantees the exchange to doom. Does Sal really want to know why Amy missed their appointment? If so, Sal could have said something like *"I waited for you yesterday until I had to leave for class, what came up?"* So the first problem is that the conversation was begun with an angry agenda. The second problem is that Amy wades right into the choppy water with her own angry response. She could choose to address Sal's anger rather than the words, and say something like *"yeah, I was running late... you sound frustrated about it."* Another problem is that Sal further agitates the waters by saying that Amy is "always" running late. Reactive and totalizing words like **always**, **never**, and **hate** are ill suited to fostering good communication. Good communication requires the sender to send the message they intend to send and the receiver to hear and respond to that message. Sal's real message may have been something like *"My feelings were hurt yesterday when you didn't show up, and now I find myself wondering about our relationship."*

Compare *"You never showed up-where were you yesterday?!"* with *"My feelings were hurt yesterday when you didn't show up, and now I find myself wondering about our relationship."* What differences do you see? In the second one, Sal gives up or sets aside the desire to lash out at Amy. Instead of using communication to inflict pain, Sal is emotionally honest and even vulnerable with Amy. This is certainly a risk, but one Sal may be willing to take out of regard for

Amy and for their relationship. Just imagine the directions the conversation can go from there!