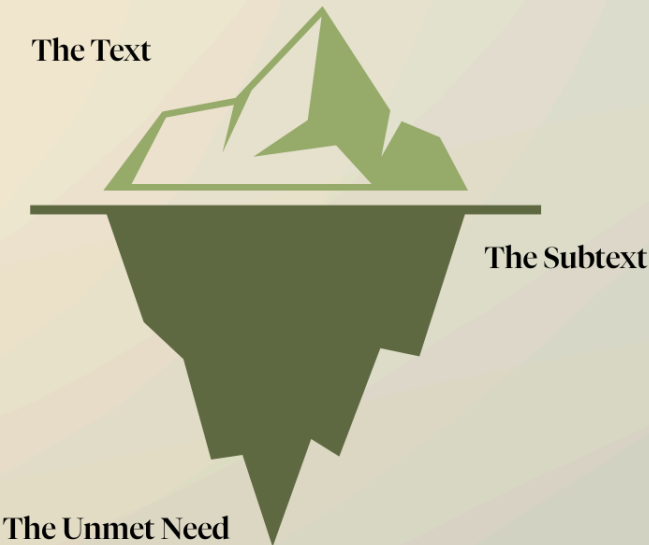


The Three Layers of Communication
Understanding What's Beneath The Words

Every conversation has layers, but we often miss the real message. We usually hear and respond to the *text*—the words spoken out loud—but underneath those words are feelings, meanings, and unmet needs. This worksheet helps you slow down and identify what's being said (the text), what's really meant (the subtext), and what core needs (unmet needs) might be driving the conversation for both you and the people around you. Take a look at this Communication Iceberg:



The Text	The Subtext	The Unmet Need(s)
<i>What was actually said?</i> Purpose: To keep grounded in the situation without interpretations.	<i>What is the meaning or intention behind the words?</i> Purpose: To build empathy and seek perspective and possible intentions.	<i>What is the deeper need or desire motivating the words?</i> Purpose: To move from empathy and decoding to a potential for repair.
Example		
You never listen to me.	I'm feeling unimportant right now due to you forgetting or being distracted.	I need more of your attention. My unmet need is feeling prioritized.

Practice Uncovering Meaning

Think of a recent disagreement or conflict that you were in with someone you care about. Use this model to start to read between the lines of what was actually said to find out what the other person was *really* saying and what they might have needed from you in that situation. If it feels safe to, it's also really helpful to bring it back to the person you had conflict with to 'check your work' and see if you got the three layers correct. If not, this can be a really important way of starting to learn more about what the other person needs and how they understand the conflict.

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The Text	The Subtext	The Unmet Need(s)
Helpful Questions to Uncover the Subtext Layer		
- What do you think your partner was <i>really</i> trying to communicate? - If you imagine the other person's emotional state in that moment, what might they have been feeling? - Were there any words, tones, body language, or gestures that hinted at something deeper? - Could there have been any fear, disappointment, longing, or shame underneath their words? - If you imagine hearing the other person's statement as a <i>protest</i> or <i>bid for connection</i> (i.e. Seeking closeness or pushing away), what might it be saying? - What might the other person hope you would understand from their text layer, even if they didn't say it directly?		

Helpful Questions to Uncover the Unmet Needs Layer
- What basic emotional need might be underneath this moment? - What might they have been hoping <i>you</i> could provide in that moment? - How might their past experiences or attachment patterns shape this need? - If this need were met, how do you imagine the other person might have felt or responded differently? - What is one way you could acknowledge or respond to that unmet need now?
Possible Unmet Needs
- Feeling safe, heard, seen, understood, loved, respected, important, prioritized, accepted, connected, autonomous, good enough, validated, cared for, comforted, reassured, belonging, trust, predictability, recognition, clarity, etc.
Reflection Questions to Consider
- How did you feel when the other person said their text layer? - What story did you tell yourself about what they meant? - Is it possible that your interpretation was shaped by your unmet needs/fears? - What happens when you imagine giving them the benefit of the doubt? - What could you do differently next time to listen for the need rather than react to the words? - What did you notice about the other person's communication patterns? - What did you notice about your communication patterns? - Were your guesses about the other person's subtext and unmet needs accurate? To what degree? - What would the other person need to express their needs differently next time? - What helps you feel safe expressing your needs? - What helps you discover your own subtext and unmet needs? - What helps you hear the other person's needs without becoming defensive? - What are common unmet needs for myself? How can I communicate them?

It's hard to make meaningful change, especially when a lot of these patterns were created a long time ago! Reach out to our team of trained therapists who can support you in getting out of the cycle in your relationship and closer to the relationship you'd like to be a part of. Your therapist can support you in making a personalized plan to dive deeper into understanding your thoughts and feelings, the unmet needs, and how to them in healthier ways, either as an individual or in a couple/dyad. Learn more about our team members on our website - www.therapyuninterrupted.ca/our-team - or book your initial appointment with a therapist [here](#)!