

Message. The mainstay modern-day communication. Whether this is texting, WhatsApp-ing, Snapping, or A. N. Other form that I as a Gen X am clueless about (!), those who own a phone will use some form of messaging to communicate with others, either in an individual or group way.

On the face of it, messages are a simple, quick and efficient way of communicating with friends. However, through my work with young people as a therapist, and as a mum of teenagers, I have witnessed the emotional turmoil that this seemingly harmless mode of communication can evoke. Being left on 'delivered' - or worse still on 'read' - leaving group chats with no explanation, private messages outside of the 'main group', and belonging to multiple groups all with different members, names and subject matters, are just a few of the numerous message situations that seem to have the potential to result in an environment of miscommunication and misunderstanding and ultimately feelings being hurt. Navigating the unwritten rules of messaging for young people, who are already struggling with the angst that the teenage years brings, results in a perfect storm conducive to positive mental health.

It seems to me that there needs to be some redress of messaging and how to 'do it' in a way that is a positive rather than negative experience, enabling the modern mode of communication to achieve its original goal – efficient, straightforward communication with another person/people. I believe that the key here is to go back to basics, reminding our young people of the cornerstone of positive communication with others - treating others how we would wish to be treated ourselves. As parents, we hope that our young people will grow to be adults who are compassionate and kind and communicate in a straightforward way. We need to remind our young people that messaging is simply another way of communicating with others. To this end I wondered whether the simple guide below might help young people to rethink how they message and hopefully revert to a way of communicating that is more positive, helpful and kind whereby messages are relished and enjoyed, rather than anxiety-inducing, and therefore, dreaded.

How to send and respond to messages in a way that promotes positive mental health

bck2basics – how2msg

(This guide has been written in a way that can either be used by a parent as a springboard for talking to their young person or read directly by young people themselves).



Message - to message or not to message.

The first question that we need to ask ourselves is whether a message is the right mode of communication in this instance. Can I say what I want/need to by message? Would it be better/easier to talk to someone? Perhaps a voice note/call would work well? This will be dependent on the subject matter of the message (see below).



Environment – Receiving Messages

We need to think about where we are at the time we receive and then read/open a message. Are we in a place where we can respond to messages? It may be appropriate to wait to check our messages until we're somewhere they can be responded to, or thought about, if need be. We can't control what people might say in a message so be mindful that if we're in a place where we don't want to be distracted by message content, it may be best to wait to read a message later. Examples of this might be not reading a message just before school starts/ before an exam/before going to bed.

Similarly, when we send a message we don't know where people are. Be mindful that people may not respond to, or even read, a message straightaway – and that can be for a whole host of reasons. And that's ok.



Subject matter of the Message

This is crucial to determining whether a message is appropriate to send or not. Messages can be great for organising activities, checking on homework/details of meetings/light conversation. However, the use of messaging to talk about feelings and emotions may not be helpful. The written word can be misinterpreted. It can also be hard to convey exactly what one means when messaging – resulting in misunderstanding between people. If you want to tell people how you're feeling, it's often best conveyed in person, or by calling, or using the voice note option.

Remember, messages/written word can be forwarded/ screenshotted and leave an online footprint



Simple and straightforward language.

It is important to remember that it is not always easy to express ourselves as we might want to with the written word. Meaning can sometimes be misconstrued. Using simple and straightforward language helps messages to be received in the way that they were intended. This relates back to the above point about the subject matter of messaging – avoid messaging about feelings or intense subjects.



Answering messages – being left on 'delivered' or 'read'

Messages do not need to be responded to immediately.

It is ok to read a message and respond at a time that is appropriate to you.

In my experience of talking to young people, I have learnt that there is an expectation that messages ‘should’ be responded to immediately once read. This creates pressure and anxiety for both the sender and the recipient of the message. There are several ways to think about and manage this.

An invitation to do something does need a response, but it is ok to not know straightaway whether you can accept (you may need to check with a parent), or whether you wish to go. It is not essential, but a ‘holding’ text may be helpful as a way of letting the sender know that you have seen the message and will come back to them once you have a definitive reply - the important thing here is to remember to do so!

Leaving messages not responded to, either being on ‘read’ or ‘delivered’ is not necessarily a bad thing. As we have said, it may not be an appropriate environment to read messages, hence leaving people on ‘delivered’. Or you may not know the answer to the message, therefore being left ‘on read’. You may need some time to think about what you’d like to say in response, or you may simply be busy. Try not to leave messages being unanswered for days, though – think about how this would feel if it was you sending the message. Equally, try not to feel offended if you are the sender and your message is not answered immediately – try to remember that we are all in different situations at any given point and therefore won’t always respond immediately – and that’s ok.

Be mindful that leaving messages on delivered, but being ‘seen’ on other social media platforms, can feel hurtful and can lead to people ruminating on the reasons for their message not being responded to, or even ‘on delivered.’ It doesn’t feel good – and can be interpreted as unkind, being ignored or some other negative thought. It might be helpful to think about how you would feel in the same situation.



Group messages

Group messages can be an efficient and inclusive way of communicating with multiple people at once. Navigating group messaging can be fraught with anxiety. However, if we break it down, all the guidelines above are applicable to group messages. There are a few additional things to remember.

Remember that replying to invites is polite. Not acknowledging the invitation doesn’t feel good and is rude. Respond to group messages on the group. Otherwise, it puts people in a difficult position and leaves others in the dark about who is attending. If you’re inviting people to a group activity it may be helpful to let people know when you’d like an answer by. This provides clarity for all the group members and enables plans to proceed once the time limit has passed without guilt and worry about excluding people who haven’t replied.

If you’re unhappy about what’s happening in a group, leave (and explain why, if you can). Silence on a group can mean complicity.

Individual messages are ok. Some things are only meant for one person. Equally it is ok to message one friend and invite them to do something and not the whole group. Remember though that people may talk and if you reply to one person's message and not someone else's people can find out and have feelings about this. The simplest way to avoid upset is to reply to all your messages.



Empathy and Compassion

If young people can send and receive messages with empathy and compassion, we can move away from the anxiety-ridden arena that many are experiencing, back towards the original premise of a simple, efficient (and perhaps fun!) way of communicating with our friends. As I said at the start of this blog, the Golden Rule 'to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself' seems to me to be the fundamental guiding principle when it comes to messaging.

Messaging is just one facet of young people's lives that we could help them to manage in a way that could improve their emotional wellbeing. If you are worried about a young person's mental health, or simply want to talk something through, please feel free to get in touch.

Charlie Fancy
Integrative Psychotherapist in Private Practice
www.charlifancy.co.uk