Chapter 1

A New Way to Converse

Without language, we would find ourselves living in a state of emotional chaos. Our brain has given us the potential to communicate in extraordinary ways, and the ways we choose to use our words can improve the neural functioning of the brain. In fact, a single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.

If we do not continually exercise the brain's language centers, we cripple our neurological ability to deal with the problems we encounter with each other. Language shapes our behavior, and each word we use is imbued with multitudes of personal meaning. The right words, spoken in the right way, can bring us love, money, and respect, while the wrong words—or even the right words spoken in the wrong way—can lead a country to war. We must carefully orchestrate our speech if we want to achieve our goals and bring our dreams to fruition.

Although we are born with the gift of language, research shows that we are surprisingly unskilled when it comes to communicating with others. We often choose our words without thought, oblivious of the emotional effects they can have on others. We talk more than we need to. We listen poorly, without realizing it, and we often fail to pay attention to the subtle meanings conveyed by facial expressions, body gestures, and the tone and cadence of our voice—elements of communication that are often more important than the words we actually say.

These conversational shortcomings are not caused by poor education. Rather they are largely related to an underdeveloped brain, for the areas that govern social awareness, empathy, and related language skills are not fully operational until we're about thirty years old. Despite this

neurological handicap, scientific research shows that anyone—young or old—can exercise the language and social-awareness centers of the brain in ways that will enhance their capacity to communicate more effectively with others.

To date we've identified and documented twelve strategies that will enhance the dynamics of any conversation, even with strangers. They can stimulate deep empathy and trust in the listener's brain, and they can be used to interrupt negative thought patterns that, if left unchecked, can actually damage your brain's emotional-regulation circuits.

The Twelve Strategies of Compassionate Communication
1. Relax
2. Stay present
3. Cultivate inner silence
4. Increase positivity
5. Reflect on your deepest values
6. Access a pleasant memory
7. Observe nonverbal cues
8. Express appreciation
9. Speak warmly
10. Speak slowly
11. Speak briefly
12. Listen deeply

In this book, we'll show you how to use these strategies to rapidly develop deep, long-lasting relationships at home and at work. You'll learn how to interrupt unconscious inner speech that generates anxiety, fear, and doubt. You'll build more intimate relationships in your personal life, and you'll build more successful relationships with your clients, employees, and colleagues. You'll create fun, productive collaborations at work, you'll enhance your management skills, and this will translate into more income and sales.

You'll learn how to recognize when another person is lying, and you'll discover how to use your intuition to know what others are thinking before they even speak. You'll even discover how silence can strengthen the power of your communication skills.

We'll also show you a little secret that will change your facial expression in ways that will inspire trust in others. You can change the rate of your speech to influence how the other person feels, and you;ll be able to use your body language to convey more meaning than words can ever

capture.

If you practice these strategies for just a few minutes each day, you'll think more clearly, you'll enhance your creativity, and you'll generate more authentic dialogues with others. You can even eliminate conflicts before they begin.

Our brain-scan studies, when combined with the latest research in the fields of language, communication, and mindfulness, demonstrate that these strategies can improve memory and cognition while simultaneously lowering stress, anxiety, and irritability—factors that are known to undermine the effectiveness of any conversation or social interaction. As you practice these strategies on a daily basis, your self-confidence and satisfaction in life will grow in ways that can be measured in the laboratory and felt at home.

We call this strategy "Compassionate Communication," and when you use them in your conversations, something quite surprising occurs: both of your brains begin to align themselves with each other. This special bond is a phenomenon referred to as "neural resonance," and in this enhanced state of mutual attunement two people can accomplish remarkable things together. Why? Because it eliminates the natural defensiveness that normally exists when people casually converse.

The elements of Compassionate Communication can be combined in different ways to fit different situations, and you can integrate them with other communication approaches, thereby making them more effective. You can use Compassionate Communication with children to help them cope more effectively with interpersonal conflicts, to discuss difficult topics, and even help them achieve higher grades in school. It also helps family members and caregivers converse more effectively with people who are suffering from mental illness or various forms of cognitive decline. Psychotherapists and peer-counseling groups have integrated Compassionate Communication into their practices, and it has been embraced by many spiritual and religious organizations that promote interfaith dialogue and nonviolent communication.

Compassionate Communication in the Workplace

Compassionate Communication was originally developed as a tool to help couples build intimacy and resolve conflicts, and it has found its way into the hallways of hospitals and caregiving facilities, where doctors and nurses use it to improve their interactions with patients and colleagues.

Compassionate Communication has also generated strong interest in the boardrooms of corporate America. It reduces work-related stress, which compromises productivity and eventually leads to burnout, and it has proven to be particularly effective for building stronger and more cooperative teams, for improving communication between upper and lower management, and for improving client and customer support, thus leading to increased sales and company loyalty.

Financial and real estate companies have also embraced Compassionate Communication. Donna Phelan, a vice president and investment officer at a major bank, explains:

> In the fast-paced world of business and financial management, my most important responsibility is client communication Service professionals have a tremendous need to integrate the most effective strategies that exist, and this is particularly true when working in volatile financial markets, where people often experience sensory overload due to the flood of information coming from stock-quote monitors, analysts' research reports, urgent e-mails, and multiple phone lines ringing at once. The principles and techniques of Compassionate Communication provide a mind-set that optimizes the dialogue between clients, advisors, and market strategists. The mind-set asks, what do clients want most? The answer: to be listened to, and to be heard, in the briefest period time, with the greatest accuracy, and in a manner that generates mutual respect and trust. In my profession, business success depends on developing these crucial skills, and we have found that advanced training in Compassionate Communication effectively and quickly accomplishes this need.

In personal relationships, poor listening and speaking skills are one of the major causes of disputes and divorce. And in the business world, such weaknesses can drive a company into bankruptcy. Thus any strategy that can teach a person to speak with clarity, brevity, calmness, kindness, and sincerity will increase interpersonal stability in the workplace and at home. For this reason, Compassionate Communication has been incorporated into a core training module in the Executive MBA Program at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. It enhances teamwork performance and the development of socially responsible corporate values, and it helps to reduce the stress generated by the extraordinary demands placed on students who are also managing thriving businesses. As Chris Manning, a professor of finance and real estate, states, "Compassionate Communication offers a cost-effective way to train individuals to communicate more efficiently and professionally with each other while fostering higher levels of openness, trust, and interpersonal rapport." Dr. Manning elaborates:

> As a society, we have become word dependent, unaware that words play only a partial role in the overall communication process in business. More important is the sender's skill in conveying an *intended* message and the receiver's skill at *inferring* what that message will be.[1] These nonverbal messages are imbued with feelings, attitudes, and implied values.[2] The strategies built into Compassionate Communication help students, managers, and business executives to recognize and develop these essential nonverbal cues.

Joan Summers also uses a variation of Compassionate Communication when she interviews job applicants for her insurance company. She begins by asking them what their deepest values are (a key component of Compassionate Communication that we'll address in chapter 7). If the applicant's personal values differ from the values of her company, that person is not hired, because she knows such discrepancies will eventually lead to employee dissatisfaction.

Joan then pays attention to how the person engages in dialogue: Do they make the right kind of eye contact? Do they respond to her questions directly and briefly? Is the tone of their voice warm and gentle? Do they exude positivity about themselves, their skills, and their desire to be part of her team? In essence she is using the components of Compassionate Communication to identify those individuals who have a propensity to communicate effectively with others.

At the Holmes Institute, a theological seminary of the Centers for Spiritual Living, ministerial candidates are trained in Compassionate Communication because it helps them to respond with greater sensitivity to the needs of their congregants. Elementary school teachers are also adopting versions of Compassionate Communication because it helps children develop better coping strategies when conflicts arise on the playground.

Deep Listening

Compassionate Communication puts as much emphasis on listening as it does on speaking. Conscientious listening demands that we train our busy minds to remain focused, not only on what the other person is saying, but also on the nonverbal cues reflected in the speaker's voice, face, and body language. Deep listening also interrupts the inner speech that is constantly produced by the language centers of the brain, a phenomenon we'll explore in chapter 3. When we learn how to step back and observe this chattering mind, a new type of silence is created. This allows us to give greater attention to what the other person is saying and bolsters our capacity to

intuit what the other person is feeling, including subtle forms of honesty or deceptiveness that are reflected in the micro-expressions of the face.

As recent brain-scan research shows, the more deeply we listen, the more our brain will mirror the activity in the other person's brain. This is what allows us to truly understand another person and to empathize with their sorrows and joys.

Stress and Transformation: Why Old Brains Resist New Tricks

Throughout this book we'll guide you through different strategies that will change the way you listen, speak, and interact with others, but because they are new, you may find yourself resisting them. This resistance is a natural function of the brain. Once a behavior is learned, it slips into unconscious long-term memory, where it can be brought into action with hardly any conscious effort. Even when we've learned a new behavior that's more effective, the earlier memory and behavior are triggered first.

The human brain needs a tremendous amount of energy to function, and it takes even more energy to build new neural circuits to change the way we normally converse with one another. In fact, every change we make in our lifestyle is perceived by the brain as a stressful event, which is why compassionate communication gives special attention to developing strategies that decrease stress.

Stress interferes with the neurological mechanisms that govern language production and perception. When we are stressed, the emotional circuits of the limbic brain become active, and the language circuits in the frontal lobe become less active. Communication studies have shown that stress and tension tighten up the muscles of the face in ways that convey suspicion in the minds of others who are watching us. A relaxed demeanor, on the other hand, conveys openness, confidence, and trustworthiness.

When we are under stress, our tone of voice also changes, taking on a quality of irritability and frustration. This will immediately stimulate a defensive reaction in the listener's brain that will undermine the potential of having a productive dialogue even before the conversation begins.

How do you integrate stress reduction and relaxation into a dialogue, especially when you are in the midst of a busy workday? Here's what John Watkins does at his software development firm. He starts the day by standing in a circle with his six departmental heads. The first minute is

spent yawning and stretching, which helps to clear everyone's mind of distracting thoughts and irritations. Next each person is allotted thirty seconds to describe what they are currently working on. If they're encountering any problems, or need assistance, other people in the circle can respond with positive suggestions. But again, they must adhere to the "thirty second" rule, which is a crucial component of Compassionate Communication. No criticisms may be expressed, because a single negative thought can disrupt the collaborative process for the rest of the day.

This may sound like a strange ritual for a multimillion-dollar company, but the results speak for themselves: in less than twenty minutes the team can identify the most essential goals for that day and come up with creative suggestions that can be rapidly evaluated, modified, and implemented.

When John's company was tested by an independent research team, there was—after a year of utilizing this strategy—a significant increase in corporate camaraderie and personal satisfaction, along with measurable decreases in personal anxiety and stress. The number of sick days decreased and company loyalty increased, and this translated into a lower rate of employee turnover. In essence, low stress means greater happiness, and as an important research study recently found when examining more than two thousand business divisions of ten large companies, happy people work harder. They're also more imaginative, creative, and productive.[3]

The Meandering Conversation

Compassionate Communication has a long history. It began in 1992 as an informal experiment that Mark developed with a group of transpersonal psychologists and therapists in Los Angeles. At that time there were only three "rules": relax, speak slowly, and take turns saying whatever comes to mind, without censorship.

The premise was simple: if we could speak from the depth of our beings, rather than in the defensive way we normally relate to others, we might be able to communicate our feelings and desires with more honesty, less anger, and greater sensitivity. Furthermore, if we allow ourselves to speak spontaneously from this inner, deeper self, without imposing a specific agenda on the conversation, the dialogue might become more relevant and meaningful for the individuals involved. We might be able to access deeper emotional truths without fear and thereby generate increased intimacy and trust with others.

When we teach Compassionate Communication to others, we pair people up and guide them

through a series of well-tested relaxation techniques. This is followed by several imagination and values-related exercises. Then we tell them to let their conversation flow in any direction it wants to take and to make sure that they respond only to what the other person just said. This strategy enables them to interrupt the inner agendas that most of us unconsciously impose on others when we speak.

By responding only to what the other person just said, both speaker and listener learn how to stay focused on the present moment, and this allows a stronger interpersonal connection to be established. To converse without an agenda may seem counterintuitive—and in business this may sound impractical— especially when there are important issue that needs to be addressed. But it isn't. One can open the dialogue by addressing specific topic, for this will set the tone and direction for the conversation, but once the dialogue begins, you need to give both yourself, and the person you are speaking with, the opportunity to bring up other issues and concerns that if left unaddressed could compromise the outcome that you desire.

If we don't create a "space" in which these hidden concerns and problems can be shared, then we have failed to communicate effectively. Compassionate Communication creates such a space by limiting the speaker's time and increasing active listening. Consciously encouraging spontaneity in dialogue is also one of the best ways to solve problems because it rapidly generates new ideas and solutions that are unlikely to emerge in more constrained forms of dialogue. In business this is called brainstorming. From a neurological perspective, it taps into the creativity that our human frontal lobes are famous for,[4] and which some scientists like to call "cognition without control."[5]

In situations where you are attempting to establish intimacy, following a preconceived agenda can feel like cold manipulation to the other person. The same holds true when talking to clients and colleagues. They too need to be heard, and so a balance must be struck between having an agenda and following the flow of a moment-to-moment exchange. This "flow" experience is a core element of Compassionate Communication, and research shows that it encourages optimal work capacity, with the greatest potential for creativity, and with least amount of effort and conscious control.[6]

In order to give an individual an experiential sense of the power of moment-to-moment spontaneity, we developed a specific training protocol: a twenty-minute scripted exercise in which two people sit down and practice the twelve strategies of Compassionate Communication. You will be guided through this exercise in chapter 9, and if you practice it several times, with different people, you'll begin to see how it can transform an ordinary conversation into a remarkable event. The more you practice the training exercise, the easier it will become to

integrate Compassionate Communication into conversations in the real world.

A relaxed, meandering conversation turns out to have other benefits as well. For example, it can reduce social anxiety in people who feel uncomfortable when entering new situations. It also allows a person to gain access to deeper levels of unconscious material without becoming overwhelmed by its contents. This component of compassionate communication is related to the Freudian psychoanalytic process of free association and the meditation practice known as mindfulness. Both strategies help an individual to remain relaxed and in the present moment, where they can watch the productions of their busy, noisy mind without becoming caught up in a myriad of distracting thoughts.

The Neuroscience of Mindfulness and Compassion

In the 1970s mindfulness practices were introduced to the medical community, and they are now considered one of the most effective ways to reduce stress and improve health. In the 1990s mindfulness began to transform the world of psychotherapy. By remaining deeply relaxed and observant of their feelings and thoughts, patients were able to reduce their anxiety, depression, and irritability. They didn't have to do anything other than to watch themselves with detachment.

As interest in mindfulness continued to grow, teams of neuroscientists began to explore the neurological correlates of this unusual way of thinking. As they observed the brains of hundreds of people while they practiced various forms of relaxation, stress reduction, and meditation, they discovered a common effect. Mindfulness not only increased a person's ability to control destructive emotions, it also improved the cognitive functioning of the brain, especially in areas relating to language and social awareness.

Our own brain-scan research found that the strategies incorporated in mindfulness could strengthen the neural circuits associated with empathy, compassion, and moral decision making, and it even appears to enhance our ability to be more aware of the workings of our own consciousness. As we began to study the latest findings concerning the coevolution of language and the brain, we realized that the principles of mindfulness could be directly applied to our conversations with other people.

Speaking Briefly and the "Thirty Second" Rule

The neuroscience of language, consciousness, and communication raises many fundamental questions, the answers to which consistently defy definition. For example: When we speak, where do our words come from? Our brain or our mind? And do we mean by mind? Is it purely a production of the brain, or is it something else? he evidence suggests that the mind and the brain are interconnected, but it remains a mystery as to what, or where, that connection is. Indeed, it even appears that the mind has a "mind" of its own, and so does the brain!

Similar dilemmas arise when we try to study the nature of consciousness. What is it and where is it? Is it generated solely by neural activity, or is it a separate force that influences the activity of the brain? Hypotheses abound, but nobody really seems to know.

However, we do have a few clues that illuminate the relationship between the brain, our thoughts, and the ability to communicate effectively. For example, everyday consciousness seems to be dependent on an area of the frontal lobes where short-term “working memory” is processed. Our brain stores a tremendous amount of information in long-term memory, but when carrying out a task it must select only the pieces of information that relate to that task in a meaningful and appropriate way.

How much information can our conscious mind hold in its working memory? About four “chunks,” and it can hold them only for thirty seconds or less (we’ll explain this in more detail later). This tiny bit of information, contained in a tiny window of time, is what we use to communicate our needs to others. This evidence convinced us to modify compassionate communication in a fundamental way: when conversing with others, we realized, we should limit ourselves whenever possible to speaking for no more than twenty or thirty seconds. Even a single sentence can contain more than four chunks of information.

Most people say, “But I need time to explain!” That may be true, but if you talk for several minutes, the other person’s brain will only recall a fraction of what you’ve said, and it might not be the part you wanted to convey. The solution? Brevity followed by intense listening to make sure that the other person has grasped the key points of what you said. If they have, great! You can say another sentence. If not, why move on? If the other person hasn’t understood you, what good will it do?

In business, time is money, so brevity is a highly valued trait. In fact, some executives insist that important questions and statements be written down on an index card. Once condensed to fit the card, the most important information can be conveyed in the briefest period of time. It’s also a great brain-training exercise. The act of writing down a thought forces us to formulate our message in a meaningful, concise, and accurate way.

When we limit ourselves to speaking for only thirty seconds, the brain quickly adapts by

filtering out irrelevant information. There's another advantage to speaking briefly: it limits our ability to express negative emotions.

The Problem of Negativity

Extreme brevity keeps the emotional centers of the brain from sabotaging a conversation. Anger is averted before it begins, and, as we will emphasize throughout this book, anger rarely works. Neuroscience supports this premise, but this discovery contradicts the popular belief that people need to express their feelings of frustration to effectively process anger. If you don't, some therapists believe you're not being honest or true to yourself.

Yet the moment a person expresses even the slightest degree of negativity, it increases negativity in both the speaker's and listener's brains. Instead of getting rid of anger, we increase it, and this can, over time, cause irreparable damage, not only to relationships, but to the brain as well. It can interfere with memory storage and cognitive accuracy, and it can disrupt your ability to properly evaluate and respond to social situations.[7] It interferes with making rational decisions,[8] and you're more likely to feel prejudice toward others.[9] What makes anger particularly dangerous is that it blinds you even to the fact that you're angry; thus it gives you a false sense of certainty, confidence, and optimism.[10]

Expressing anger is destructive, but this does not mean that we should completely repress negative feelings. That too can be quite damaging, because unconscious anger—and the constant flow of stress hormones and neurochemicals it releases—can literally eat you alive, damaging the emotional-regulation centers of the brain..

Research shows that the best way to deal with negativity is to observe it inwardly, without reaction and without judgment. The next step is to consciously reframe each negative feeling and thought by shaping it into a positive, compassionate, and solution-based direction. As the esteemed psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has demonstrated, it's important to generate a minimum of three to five positive thoughts in response to every negative reaction you have. When you do, your work will thrive and your personal relationships will blossom.[11] If you don't, your relationships and work will wither.

There's another way to prevent negativity from creeping into the conversation: express frequent comments of appreciation. The more the better, but they need to be heartfelt and genuine. Talk about positive events in your life and avoid complaining about the world. When it

comes to positive and negative feelings, the brain responds like an on-off switch: it cannot focus on both at the same time, and as we will explain in the next chapter, negativity is more powerful. That's why we have to maintain the highest positivity ratio we possibly can if we want our work, relationships, and lives to flourish.[12]

Think Before Speaking

As our research evolved, we found that speaking spontaneously, without censorship, could sometimes cause problems for the listener. So we added another rule: before you speak, ask yourself, can the other person hear what I'm about to say without becoming upset? If the answer is no or even maybe, then put that thought aside for a moment, or write it down on a sheet of paper. At a later time, the other person may be more receptive to what you want to say, and in the meantime you'll be able to think about alternative ways of getting your message across.

In business a poorly phrased statement can undermine an important sale or even cost a person their job. But many people fail to realize that the same principle applies to personal and family relationships. Why do we tend to ignore the strategy of thinking before we speak at home? There are many reasons, but one of the most common is tiredness. Exhaustion from a long day of intense work slows down the compassion circuits in the brain. We become impatient, and we lose some of our ability to think clearly. In this state, negative comments can slip out because we simply don't have the energy to turn them off.

Another reason we may not think before we speak is that we grew up in a family with poor communication skills. Illness and aging can also interfere with the neural circuits governing language and emotion, causing us to speak in ways that are difficult for other people to handle.

Of course expressions of frustration and irritability during conversations are unavoidable, but when they happen, you need to do some reparation work. Sometimes a simple apology will suffice, but the best way to handle an emotional blunder is to ask the other person how they were affected. Just showing interest, and being fully present in your blunder, can be enough to reinstate mutual trust and respect. If you stay deeply relaxed during this delicate exchange of words, you'll be able to handle your frustration, or the other person's irritability, with greater diplomacy and tact.

Unlearning How to Speak

Nearly all the research conducted in the fields of communication suggests that we dialogue poorly with one another. And yet most people believe they are effective communicators. How can that be? How can we be oblivious to our own shortcomings? Neuropsychologists have an explanation: "positivity bias."[13] Believing we are better than we actually are turns out to be neurologically enhancing! It gives us confidence and hope in the most difficult situations; without it, we are more likely to give up and fail. Having a positivity bias helps us to maintain emotional stability, and the part of the brain most activated is the anterior cingulate, a key center for generating compassion toward others.[14]

As we'll explain in the next several chapters, the development of our basic language skills tends to culminate around the age of twelve. It's enough to get us through elementary school, but the finer aspects of communication and social awareness are regulated by parts of the brain that don't become fully operative until our late twenties or early thirties.

The metaphor of riding a bicycle comes to mind. We learn how to ride when we are young, but if you want to excel at bicycling, you have to *unlearn* the bad habits you acquired in your earlier years and replace them with more efficient skills. To be an expert bicyclist, you need to delve into the mechanics of balance and motion, and to immerse yourself fully in the *experience* of riding. And you have to practice, practice, practice.

The same applies to communication. We learn the basics in grammer school and high school, but if you want to excel at communicating, you have to unlearn many bad habits and replace them with advanced skills like empathetic listening. You have to study the mechanics of verbal inflection, and you have to learn how to read facial expressions that most people tend to ignore. You have to immerse yourself fully in the experience of speaking and listening, and you have to practice, practice, practice.

To improve our conversational skills, we need to do four things:

1. Recognize the limits of our personal communication styles.
2. Interrupt old, habituated patterns of conversing.
3. Experiment with new communication strategies long enough to build new neural circuits and behaviors.
4. Consciously apply these strategies when we talk with others.

How long does it take to experience the beneficial effects of these new communication strategies? Based on the data we've gathered, less than an hour. We've been able to measure an 11 percent increase in social intimacy and empathy in individuals who practice Compassionate Communication with two or three different people, for ten minutes each. That's an astonishing finding, and so far there are no other communication strategies that have been able to generate the same degree of effectiveness.

A New Science of Communication

In the first part of this book, we'll present the most recent evidence on how the brain processes language, speech, and listening. We'll explain how language builds a unique brain and how trust and cooperation are developed and conveyed to others. We'll take you through each of the twelve strategies of compassionate communication and share with you the neuropsychological studies that support them.

Then we'll guide you through a twenty-minute interpersonal exercise that incorporates these strategies in a way that will enhance the communication circuits of your brain. Along the way, you may discover that many of your old notions of conversing with others need to be jettisoned and replaced by new forms of speaking and listening.

When doubt creeps in—which happens whenever we try to change old behaviors—we ask that you try to suspend your current belief systems as you experiment with the exercises in this book. By assuming a "beginner's mind," we can teach our old brain some newer tricks that will deepen our connection to others.

We'll introduce you to several techniques that effectively eliminate doubt, worry, and procrastination, and in the final chapters we'll share with you how different people—lovers, parents, children, therapists, teachers, financiers, entrepreneurs, and business executives—have applied compassionate communication to their work and lives.

We suggest that you spend five or ten minutes each day practicing the different components of compassionate communication, first with the people you trust the most, and then with other people in your social and business circles. After a few weeks of practice, you should notice a significant difference in how you relate to others and how they respond to you, even though they may be unfamiliar with the principles you are applying. Ask them if they notice any difference in your communication style. They'll probably pause for a few moments and agree, and in that instant you will have successfully introduced

compassionate communication to them. You'll generate greater empathy and mutual trust simply by using your words more wisely.

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