Session 21: Communication That Repairs Instead of Repeats

Duration: 60 minutes • Recovery education group. Ensure all participants are seated and ready

Materials: Timer; I-statement worksheet; the Session 21 handout (I-Statement & Repair)

Learning objectives — by the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Use the speaker–listener structure: one talks, one reflects, then switch
- State a complaint as an I-statement with a specific request instead of a character attack
- Demonstrate a repair attempt — a pause, softening, or return — during a tense exchange

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 3 — Rebuilding. The one idea today is that speaker–listener structure, I-statements, and repair attempts make communication repair instead of repeat. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. Nobody learns to communicate by hearing a lecture about communication — so today is mostly practice. We work the speaker–listener structure, the I-statement with a specific request, and the repair attempt: the move that ends a conversation with the relationship stronger than the problem.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: “Think of your last real argument. Who talked most, who listened most — and how did it end: repair, retreat, or explosion?” Log every craving score on the roster.

Passing is honored — you may pass any question, prompt, or practice without explanation, step out and rejoin, and choose a partner-only option where one is offered.

Teaching (20 minutes)

Addiction-era communication runs on a short menu: attack, defend, withdraw, or manipulate — all of them aimed at ending discomfort fast, all of them guaranteeing the same fight next week. Repair-oriented communication has learnable mechanics. Listen to reflect before responding: repeat back what you heard until the speaker says 'that's it.' Speak from the I-position: 'I felt scared when the call didn't come; I need us to agree on a check-in time' lands where 'you never care' only wounds. Make requests specific and positive — what you want, not only what you hate. And learn the repair attempt: any move that de-escalates mid-fight — 'I'm getting loud; give me ten minutes and I will come back,' humor that includes rather than mocks, a hand raised like a flag of truce. The goal is not winning or even agreeing; it is ending the conversation with the relationship stronger than the problem.

- **Reflecting is not agreeing** You can prove you heard someone — fully — while still disagreeing. Most fights are two people who have not yet been heard trying to be heard louder.
- **Criticism vs. complaint** A complaint names a behavior and a need; criticism names a character. We convert every criticism into a complaint before it leaves our mouths.

- **Flooding is a body signal** Racing heart, tunnel thinking, voice rising — past that point, no good words exist. A timed, promised return ('twenty minutes, and I will come back') is a skill, not stonewalling.
- **Repair early, repair often** Couples and families that last are not conflict-free; they are repair-rich. One genuine attempt, accepted, can save an entire evening.

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

Motivational interviewing research supports engaging ambivalence through open questions, reflection, and the person's own change talk rather than argument or shame (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Key sources for this session: Miller & Rollnick (2023); Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2019), TIP 35; Prochaska & DiClemente (1983). Evidence strength: Moderate as facilitation practice guidance; MI trial strength does not transfer to check-in prompts. Spiritual practice: Conversational prayer and listening — correlates with reflective listening and MI-informed communication; evidence: Moderate (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Full citations: Appendix H. The session's Scripture material is in its optional handout (Appendix I), as theological foundation, quoted from the King James Version.

'Evidence strength' grades the correlated mechanism, not the spiritual practice itself

Pause midway through teaching: ask, "What part of that sounds most like your life right now?" Take two or three answers, connect them to the teaching, and continue. Teach in your own words — the bullets are your map, not a script to read aloud.

Discussion questions (10 minutes)

1. Which old-menu move is yours — attack, defend, withdraw, or maneuver?
2. What does flooding feel like in your body, and how much warning do you get?
3. Who in your life is easiest to really hear? What do they do that helps?
4. What repair sentence could you actually say, in your own voice, mid-fight?

Skill practice (12 minutes)

Main practice (20 minutes, extends into discussion time by design): pairs run two rounds of speaker–listener on a real but moderate topic ('something small that irritates you at home'). Speaker gets three minutes with an I-statement and one specific request; listener only reflects and asks 'is there more?' Then switch. Facilitator times strictly and debriefs: what changed when you were actually heard?

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

Use speaker–listener once this week on something small. Before any hard conversation, write your I-statement and your request in your workbook. Log how the conversation ended: repair, retreat, or explosion — data, not grades. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave.

Facilitator notes and cautions

Keep practice topics moderate by instruction and by intervention: if a pair escalates, pause them, teach the timed-return move live, and restart smaller. Never use this session to mediate a live conflict between two participants in the room — that belongs with staff, privately.

Closing (2 minutes)

Reflecting is not agreeing; it is proof of hearing. Use the structure once this week on something small, and log how it ended — repair, retreat, or explosion. Data, not grades. Next week: forgiveness and amends — the heaviest luggage gets set down carefully.

Fidelity check for this session: objectives named at the start ☐ craving scores logged ☐ skill practice completed in full ☐ homework written down by participants ☐ session note filed today ☐