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Information & Support



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DISRESPECT OR MISPERCEPTION?

Sometimes we perceive someone's behaviour as offensive, even if there is no malice in it and objectively it is completely neutral. Why is this so? This question is of considerable importance if we want to explore interpersonal interactions. To better understand this issue and be able to do something about misinterpretations of someone's behaviour, it is useful to look at the thought and emotional processes that influence perception.

WHAT IS PERCEPTION?

It is a process by which we receive, organise and interpret information from the environment. The way we perceive the world and respond to different stimuli is hugely influenced by both personal and social experiences. Perception, however, is not just the passive reception of information. It is also closely linked to behaviour, as it is shaped by many factors such as beliefs, values, prejudices and the social context. What may be neutral to one person will be offensive to another. Perceptions can also be disturbed by emotions and projections of one's own experiences onto others. It is therefore important to understand the thought and emotional processes that cause neutral behaviour to be perceived as offensive.

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION ON PERCEPTION

Communication plays an important role in our perception and interpretation of behaviour. The model developed by the psychologist exploring communication Friedemann Schulz von Thun is based on the communication square and identifies four elements of any speech:

- factual information (facts and data, specifics, contents)
- relationship (tone of voice, choice of words, facial expressions, gestures)
- self-revelation (opinions, thoughts, judgments)
- appeal (needs, expectations).

Each message can be interpreted on four levels, potentially leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. There are many subtleties in communication, so the same statement can be received differently by other people. For example, at a non-verbal communication level, someone who does not look straight in the eye during a conversation may be perceived as rude or dishonest, although in reality this may be due to various factors such as culture, introversion or insecurity. Or if we have had unpleasant experiences with people who have had similar non-verbal behaviour, we may project negative emotions onto others. It is therefore important to be aware of interpretation pitfalls and to strive for a more open and empathetic perception of people.



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How not to fall into the trap of misinterpretation in communication? You will find the answer to this question in the book [*Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*](#) by Paul Ekman

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Perceptions can also be distorted by unconscious biases and stereotypes. We often tend to attribute characteristics and intentions on the basis of someone's belonging to a particular social group. For example, if we have an unconscious bias against a certain ethnic group, we may be more sensitive to the behaviour of its members and interpret it as rude or hostile, even when it is not. Unconscious biases are the result of past experiences, upbringing and media influence. They are often hidden from our awareness, but can influence perceptions and reactions to neutral behaviour. Therefore, it is worth becoming aware of them and striving to see others more objectively and fairly.

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

Social norms, values and cultural expectations greatly influence how we perceive someone's behaviour – behaviour considered rude in one country may be perfectly normal in another. For example, in some cultures, direct confrontation may be perceived as rude, while in other cultures it is seen as a sign of sincerity and openness.

We are often inclined to judge the behaviour of others through the perspective of our own norms and values, which can lead to misinterpretations and unnecessary conflicts. Therefore, it is worth being aware of these differences and striving to understand and accept the different approach.

WHY DO WE MISINTERPRET NEUTRAL BEHAVIOUR AS RUDE?

Interpretation of behaviour is a complex issue which depends on many factors. Perceptions are often coloured by emotions, beliefs and the projection of one's own experiences onto others, as well as unconscious prejudices and stereotypes. Sometimes we interpret someone's behaviour as rude when we feel threatened, misunderstood or unappreciated. This may be due to the need for self-affirmation and sensitivity to negative signals.

WAYS TO OVERCOME THE TENDENCY TO MISINTERPRET

Although our perceptions are conditioned by natural tendencies, there are ways to prevent this:

- developing self-awareness, learning about our own projections and prejudices – by reflecting and working on ourselves, we can become more aware of our own emotions and beliefs, allowing for a more objective perception of others
- developing empathy, i.e. the ability to understand other people's perspectives – often neutral behaviour is the result of different backgrounds, experiences and sensitivities, by listening empathetically and trying to understand the other person, misinterpretations and conflicts can be avoided
- communication is very important in avoiding misinterpretations – it is important to express intentions and expectations precisely and clearly, if we are aware of cultural differences, communication can be adapted to the needs and values of others
- listening and responding empathetically to non-verbal signals can help avoid misinterpretations.

Misperceptions and overinterpretations can lead to conflicts and tension between people. This is why it is so important to be aware of one's own projections, biases and emotions, as they influence perceptions. And by developing empathy, open-mindedness and the ability to understand other people's perspectives, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can be avoided. Ultimately, only mutual understanding and acceptance provide an opportunity to develop healthy and satisfying interpersonal relations.

***Don't wait, call us! If you have communication problems,
contact a specialist. We are here to support you!***