

Understand

Eleanor and Lucy meet for coffee every so often. After exchanging a brief hug, Eleanor asks: “How was your week?”

Lucy sighs. “It’s been nothing but work. I’m always so busy. I get into the office at 7am and I don’t leave until after 6 o’clock. I can’t remember the last time I put my kids to bed.”

Eleanor frowns. “That’s crazy! You shouldn’t keep doing that. You should get a new job. You’ll kill yourself. And what about your kids? You should definitely get a new job.”

Lucy sighs again. “Yeah maybe. Anyway, how has your week been?”

This is a classic example of someone jumping straight to a response rather than trying to understand the other person. As a result, Lucy shuts down the topic and doesn’t allow Eleanor in any further.

The five F’s of defensiveness

FIGHT	Aggression
FLIGHT	Withdrawal from a relationship
FAKE	Build walls of pretense so you don’t have to let people in
FREAK OUT	A reaction of stress
FLOP	Becoming frozen or sadly silent

Understanding someone, and being understood in return, is to know and be known, and still be loved and accepted. It is perhaps the highest form of love – to truly know someone and love them.

What happens when there is no understanding between two people?

A lack of understanding leads to resentment and disconnection from each other. You’ll start to hear comments like: That person just doesn’t “get me”, or there is no connection between us, or there is lots of distance between us.

Why don’t people understand each other? In simple terms, it’s selfishness. Our own desires override the other person’s needs. The desire for our own point of view to be heard, or to win points, is more important to us than the welfare of the other person.

What happens if you don’t feel understood?

If you don’t feel understood in a relationship, whether it’s a marriage, friendship or another kind of relationship, it puts up a barrier in a relationship.

One or both of you feel invisible or unimportant, and that’s when you put up a barrier of defensiveness. People react defensively because they anticipate or perceive a threat in their environment – in this case, because they’re not being heard or understood. Unfortunately, defensive behavior creates a reciprocal cycle. One party acts defensively, which causes the other party to respond defensively, which in turn causes the first party to raise their defenses even higher, and so on.

What does defensive look like?

Defensiveness takes on many forms. It can look like fake happy, or it can take the form of flight, where someone will simply not turn up, leave early or not engage in the relationship. It can look like someone keeping the conversation to shallow topics, so that they don’t let people into the deeper rooms of their hearts. Defensiveness can also look like a fight – aggressiveness or anger. All of these forms of defensiveness are coping mechanisms and are fairly common human responses to threat.

How to avoid defensiveness

If you are truly known, loved and accepted, then you experience freedom in a relationship, not threat. Defensiveness doesn’t have a place in a relationship founded on freedom. In particular, kids and teenagers need to know that “it’s okay to be me, even if I’m confused and make mistakes.” If parents can communicate that they still love their child but this behavior is not okay, children will grow up with security because they’ve experienced unconditional love.

Everyone needs unconditional love, including adults. If you didn’t experience it as a child, your adult relationships may bear the scars of those early inflicted wounds.

How do you understand – know, to grow the undergirding love and acceptance of someone? Your relationship needs to be built on SAFETY.

Measuring understanding in small groups

Is it possible to have deep understanding in a group situation? What if you're with a group of friends or in a church small group?

There are depth indicators in a group. The most external conversations are the most shallow, although they are necessary. The next circle is, "How is your health or how has your week been?" Then you move into mind, "What are your thoughts and feelings about this?" Then move into heart, "What about you?"

In small groups remember the S of SAFETY: small and similar – relationship usually works best in a smaller setting or one-on-one with people who have similarities to each other.

Let's reframe Eleanor and Lucy's conversation.

You are with a small group of friends or a church small group. You ask one member of the group how their week has been.

"I've been busy. I'm so busy. I barely see my family because I'm busy. Please pray that I won't be so busy."

What would your instinctive response be? You need to get another job. You need to change jobs. Our first instinct is often to jump straight to response rather than trying to understand the situation. Instead, move from statements like "you should do this" to "I statements" and "you questions".

Your response might look like this instead: "That sounds exhausting. What is your week like? What is that like for you?"

Their response becomes deeper. "My boss is unreasonable, making

me work crazy hours, and I never get home to see my family."

Again, instead of jumping straight to a response of "you should..."; you reply: "That sounds pretty challenging. How are you dealing with this at the moment?"

Their answer is that they don't like to upset their boss or disappoint their colleagues. They don't say "no" to increased work demands because they want to avoid conflict.

Again, continue to ask questions based on trying to understand the person in a deeper way. Do they have this experience in other relationships?

Then you might ask: "You've been dealing with this for a while. What is this doing to you? What are your thoughts on it at the moment?"

At this point, you may have formulated some thoughts yourself, but always give them a choice to hear your thoughts or opinions. "I've got some thoughts, would you like to hear them?" Or wait until they ask for your opinion. Never lead with "you should" or "you need to".

In this case the person is coping through people pleasing – if I don't do that, people might not like me, they might not accept me. This way of coping has a use-by date because we lose our self-identity. They are probably using the same mechanism in your small group or group of friends, which means they'll never let you move beyond shallow questions - unless they feel safe.

When connecting with someone, always keep in mind: Is this a caring question? Is this respectful? Is this a choice question? Does this allow facing – rather than flight or fight - to occur?

What happens if you just don't understand?

What if you just don't understand? You will come across people in life – perhaps a friend, colleague or spouse – whose points of view you just don't understand or agree with. Why is this person always late? Why do they always talk over everyone else? Why won't they talk to me? Why are they so aggressive when we have an argument? Often our behaviours are deeply ingrained defenses against perceived threats, so it may be worth thinking about how you can help the other person feel safe.

Where there are two personalities who can't agree, you may need a referee – whether a professional or a friend. It is okay to ask for help. In a work situation, you may need to ask someone else to referee. Or you may need to talk to a mentor in the church, or your pastor, or a professional like a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist.

For most of us, truly connecting with someone is a skill to learn. It doesn't naturally come to us because most of us are self-centered (or others-centred) to some extent (rather than God-centred).

Connecting and understanding make up the majority of a relationship to the extent that they are foundational. In fact, psychiatrist Dr John Warlow says that together they possibly make up to 80% of a relationship. Connecting and understanding allows us to love people with truth. When people are free to be themselves, they experience freedom.

This is exactly what God offers us – God wants to connect with you because he knows you, accepts you and loves you. That's why he can give us total freedom from our past, from our sin, from our scars and wounds.