Don't Be a Communication Killer

Beware! Some conversation responses—like reassurance, advice, and identification—that seem helpful on the surface can actually hinder positive communication, and may even end a conversation before it has a chance to become meaningful communication.

Here are the three don'ts that we teach at our SuperCamp and school programs: don't deny, don't resolve, and don't me-too. They’re helpful in all relationships—with parents, other family members, and friends.

• Don't deny
When someone shares an experience, a fear, or a feeling and you respond with immediate reassurance, you may mean to comfort them, but what you’re really doing is cutting off their sharing with the statement that they shouldn’t feel that way—you’re denying their feelings. (Example: “I’m so fat.” . . . “You don’t need to lose weight, you look fine.”)

• Don't resolve
When someone tells you about a problem they’re having and you quickly hand them a solution, you shut them right down. (Example: “If I were you I’d . . .”) Think about it. If you wanted to chat with a friend about a problem and maybe share some ideas and they quickly throw a solution at you, it wouldn’t feel very good. Their two-minute solution to a problem you’ve been struggling with for weeks would probably (a) be unlikely to work, (b) be something you already thought of, and (c) be very likely to end the conversation.

• Don't me-too
When someone begins to share something with you that they're going through and you cut them off with a "Me, too" and go into your experience, you’ve killed the conversation. They may never get to finish telling you about their experience, but they’ll know all about what happened to you. (Example: “I know exactly what you mean, I . . .”)

None of these responses gives a conversation a chance. Often the best "conversations" are very one-sided as far as speaking is concerned. This relates to active listening and it’s a vital ingredient in meaningful communication. The "listener" listens very intently and hardly says a word, only contributing enough to let the other person know they're really hearing them. Think about the difference active listening would have made in the three don’t examples above.

Don’t kill a conversation with reassurance, advice, or identification. Your goal is not to diagnose, pacify, or fix. Let your goal be to listen, and to let the speaker know they’re being heard.