



July 2017 Tip of the Month

Communication in the Landlord-Tenant Relationship

Submitted by Laura Busian,
VLN Resource Attorney/Program Manager, Housing Law

Communication is an essential part of the landlord-tenant relationship, and effective communication is essential to a successful landlord-tenant relationship. Successful communication in the landlord-tenant relationship includes the following:

1. Knowing who to talk to;
2. Active listening;
3. Effective communication; and
4. Positive I-messages.

Once a tenant has determined who they should talk to about an issue or question related to the lease or the property they are renting, active listening, effective communication, and positive I-messages must be used to engage in successful communication with that person. A reminder of the definition of communication is helpful, particularly in this context – communication is defined as the process of sharing thoughts, opinions or information between two or more people. In seeking to talk to their landlords or property managers, tenants are well reminded that they are about to engage in an exchange of information, which is likely to include thoughts and opinions that are different from their own, and they should therefore be open to the exchange because the exchange is necessary to reach a resolution. When stressed, individuals are often so busy being angry or worried that they do not listen to what is being said. Tenants should be sure to approach their landlords or property managers when all parties are likely to be calm and open to communication. This often sets the stage for a positive and beneficial exchange.

Active Listening

Listening is an important part of communicating with others, particularly for tenants communicating with their landlords or property managers. Listening does not mean sitting still without speaking – to truly understand what is being said, it is necessary to listen actively. Active listening is when the listener shares in their own words what they think they have heard and clarifies misunderstandings, asking questions and providing feedback.

Effective Communication

Some tips for communicating effectively are as follows:

- Give the speaker undivided attention
- Look at the speaker directly, if appropriate
- Put aside distracting thoughts
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors
- “Listen” to the speaker’s body language
- Use body language and gestures to convey attention, such as nodding and smiling
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments, such as “yes” and “uh huh”
- Provide feedback
- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing – “what I’m hearing is ...” and “sounds like you are saying ...”

- Ask questions to clarify certain points – “what do you mean when you say ...?” and “is this what you mean?”
- Summarize the speaker’s comments periodically
- Defer judgment
- Allow the speaker to finish and do not interrupt
- Respond appropriately

Positive I-Messages

I-messages are a method of communicating to someone in which the individual refers to himself or herself stating their own feelings generally expressed as a sentence beginning with the word “I.” The following guidelines can help tenant communicate their messages in a positive way:

- Speak for yourself – say what you feel and need
- Do not tell the other person what they are feeling, doing, or going to do
- Own the message – use “I,” rather than “you” or “they”
- Discuss one issue at a time – avoid the “laundry list” approach
- Describe the facts of the situation
- Don’t call the other person names or make accusations

I-messages should have the following parts:

- Feelings of the Speaker – “I feel ...”
- Action of the Listener – “... when you ...”
- Consequences of the Behavior – “... because ...”
- Request for Change – “I’d like ...”

In housing matters, as well as many other types of legal matters, we often find ourselves counseling our clients and helping them problem-solve and manage crises, in addition to providing legal services. One way we can help our clients navigate the situations they are facing is to coach them in the communication skills they can use to communicate effectively and successfully when advocating for themselves or resolving conflict in the landlord-tenant relationship.

Tenants (prospective or current) may benefit from the University of Minnesota’s Renter 101 Online Course: <https://www.extension.umn.edu/family/live-healthy-live-well/healthy-homes/renter-101/>.

Laura Busian in the Housing Resources Attorney/Program Manager at Volunteer Lawyers Network and has been trained in the *RentWise* curriculum by University of Minnesota Extension (June 6, 2017).

Primary Source: Hendrickson, L., and Hagen Jokela, R. (2017). *RentWise*. University of Minnesota. (Content used with permission of the authors.) *RentWise* is a comprehensive curriculum that is intended to be taught in one-on-one or group setting to individuals who would benefit from additional education and skills to become a successful renter.