



Why We Listen Better To Strangers Than Family, by Kate Murphy

Once you know people well enough to feel close, there's an unconscious tendency to tune them out because you think you already know what they are going to say. It's kind of like when you've traveled a certain route several times and no longer notice signposts and scenery.

But people are always changing. The sum of daily interactions and activities continually shapes us, so none of us are the same as we were last month, last week or even yesterday.

The closeness-communication bias is at work when romantic partners feel they don't know each other anymore or when parents discover their children are up to things they never imagined.

It can occur even when two people spend all their time together and have many of the same experiences.

Social science researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that people often understand close relationships no better than strangers, and often worse.

The closeness-communication bias not only keeps us from listening to those we love, it can also keep us from allowing our loved ones to listen to us. It may explain why people in close relationships sometimes withhold information or keep secrets from one another.

So what can you do about it? The British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar said the primary way to maintain close relationships is through "everyday talk." That means asking, "How are you?" and actually listening to the answer.

Too often spouses, and also parents with their children, reduce conversations to logistics such as what to have for dinner, whose turn it is to do the laundry, or when to leave for soccer practice. Friends might run down their latest accomplishments and activities. What often gets left out is what is really on people's minds—their joys, struggles, hopes and fears. Sometimes people keep conversation light with friends and family because they assume they already know what's going on, but also, they may be afraid of what they might learn.

But what is love if not a willingness to listen to and be a part of another person's evolving story? A lack of listening is a primary contributor to feelings of loneliness.

