THINK COMMUNICATION

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2 UNDERSTANDING

On June 25, 2009, the world learned that the man deemed one of the "greatest entertainers of our time" had died. Thousands upon thousands of shocked fans from New York to Tokyo swarmed the Web to Tweet, Facebook, and Google—crashing Twitter's servers and slowing the Internet down to a snail's pace. Almost everyone who had ever heard him sing, watched him dance, or seen his picture wanted to know: Was the King of Pop really gone?

As his death had such a profound effect on so many people across the globe, we are compelled to ask, "Who was Michael Jackson?" According to *Newsweek's* David Gates, "He was a music legend and a legendary oddball … He was the king of pop … and he's the last we're ever likely to have."[1] For many of us, when we think of Michael Jackson, we see an artistic genius. We see a little 5-year-old superstar who started singing and dancing his heart out with his older brothers in the Jackson Five; we see the 18-time, Grammy Award-winning solo artist he would eventually become. But in the 1990s, when Jackson's career and personal life began its sad decline, we saw a darker, more elusive side to this former child star. Rumors of his "sleepovers" with young children at his Neverland ranch led to allegations of child abuse.

> **For all communication begins with *you*. Who you are and how you think determines how you interact with others and how others interact with you.**

YOUR SELF

Vitiligo, an autoimmune disease that destroys the skin coloring pigment known as *melanin*, turned his skin from brown to white.[2] Quite literally, Jackson was changing before our eyes: his naturally curly hair became straighter; his nose became sharper and more synthetic-looking. Eventually, his physical and emotional issues would lead to prescription drug dependence. And yet, "whatever his life felt like from inside, from outside it was manifestly a work of genius, whether you want to call it a triumph or a freak show."[3]

When trying to answer the question, "Who was Michael Jackson?", British blogger *hysperia* writes that he was "a man who couldn't be known and who, most likely, could not know himself … who was Michael Jackson? We can never answer that question, finally, about anyone."[4] In the end, however, while reflecting upon Michael Jackson and his life, we are able to recognize the importance of *self*. For all communication begins with *you*. Who you are and how you think determines how you interact with others and how others interact with you.

who ARE YOU?

Your **self-concept** represents the sum total of beliefs you have about yourself. It answers two simple questions: "Who are you?" and "What makes you *you*?" Not only are you defined by characteristics such as your age, nationality, race, religion, and gender (as in "I am a 30-year-old, African-American, Catholic female"), your life experiences, attitudes, and personality traits influence your opinion of your self.

Your self-concept changes as you change; you are always *becoming*. A physically awkward child may eventually grow into a confident and graceful dancer. A college student with poor grammar may eventually become a celebrated author. An "ugly duckling" teenager may eventually mature into a beautiful "swan."

Sources of Self-Concept

Where does your self-concept come from? You certainly aren't born with one. Infants only begin to recognize themselves in a mirror between 18 and 24 months of age. Only then do they begin to express the concept of "me."[5] Although many factors influence how you develop a self-concept, the following are the most significant four: self-awareness, the influence of others, past experiences, and cultural perspectives.

Self-Awareness **Self-awareness** is an understanding of your core identity.[6] It requires a realistic assessment of your traits, thoughts, and feelings. In his best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman identifies self-awareness as the first and most fundamental emotional competency: the keystone of emotional intelligence.[7] He writes, "the ability to monitor feelings from

> "People with greater certainty about their feelings are better pilots of their lives, having a surer sense of how they really feel about personal decisions from whom to marry to what job to take." –Daniel Goleman

moment to moment is crucial to psychological insight and self-understanding. An inability to notice our true feelings leaves us at their mercy. People with greater certainty about their feelings are better pilots of their lives, having a surer sense of how they really feel about personal decisions from whom to marry to what job to take."[8]

Awareness of your thoughts and feelings is referred to as **self-monitoring**.

Effective self-monitoring helps you realize, "This is anger I'm feeling." It gives you the opportunity to modify or control anger, rather than allowing it to hijack your mind and body. Self-monitoring also helps you differentiate emotional responses: love versus lust, disappointment versus depression, anxiety versus excitement. By becoming aware of your thoughts and feelings, you can avoid mistaking lust for everlasting love, avoid letting minor problems trigger depression, and avoid mistaking fear

Self-concept The relatively stable sum total of beliefs you have about yourself

Self-awareness An understanding of your core identity that requires a realistic assessment of your traits, thoughts, and feelings, as well as whether you respond appropriately to others

Self-monitoring A sensitivity to your own behavior and others' reactions as well as the ability to modify how you present yourself

THE INFLUENCE OF OTHERS

Significant others are people whose opinions you value, such as family members, friends, co-workers, and mentors. What do such people tell you about yourself? Equally important, how do they act around you?

Reference groups are groups with whom you identify and enjoy. Think about a high school clique to which you may have belonged (popular, smart, artistic, geeky, athletic). How did that membership affect your self-concept and interaction with others? How do your current group memberships (work team, church group, civic association, professional organization, social or campus club) affect the way you see yourself?

Roles are adopted patterns of behaviors associated with an expected function in a specific context or relationship. Thus, your behavior often changes when you shift to a different role. For example, how does your public role (teacher, mechanic, nurse, manager, clerk, artist, lawyer, police officer) affect your view of yourself? How do your private roles (child, parent, spouse, lover, best friend) shape your self-concept?

Rewards are recognitions received at school, on the job, or in a community for good work (academic honor, employee-of-the-month award, job promotion, community service prize). Praise and words of encouragement from others affect your self-concept. Consider how you might you feel about yourself if you never received positive feedback.

act to current events and personal circumstances. Who would you be if you could not remember your parents or childhood playmates, your successes and failures, the places you lived, the schools you attended, the books you read, and the teams you played for?[10]

It is not surprising that you (and everyone else) have a tendency to distort memories. You tend to remember the past as if it were a drama in which you were the leading player.[11] When asked about high school, many people describe it as "terrible" or "wonderful," when they really mean it *seemed* terrible or wonderful *to them*. When we tell stories about the past, we put ourselves at the center of action rather than as bit players or observers.

Cultural Background Culture plays a significant role in determining who you are and how you understand your self. Intercultural communication scholar Min-Sun Kim explains that cultures have "different ways of being, and different ways of knowing, feeling, and acting."[12] For example, Western cultures emphasize the value of independence and self-sufficiency, whereas East Asian cultures emphasize the value of group memberships.

for anger. People who are *high self-monitors* constantly watch other people, what they do, and how they respond to the behavior of others. They are also self-aware, like to "look good," and usually adapt well to differing social situations. On the other hand, *low self-monitors* are often oblivious to how others see them and may "march to their own, different drum."[9]

The Influence of Others Although self-awareness may be the keystone of emotional intelligence, the influence of other people is a more powerful determinant of your self-concept. Such influences include significant others, the groups to which you belong, the roles you assume, and the rewards you receive from others.

Past Experiences Without past experiences and personal memories, you would have little basis for a coherent self-concept. For example, vivid memories of traumatic events—the death of a loved one, the September 11 attacks, a serious automobile accident, life-threatening combat—can affect how you interpret and re-
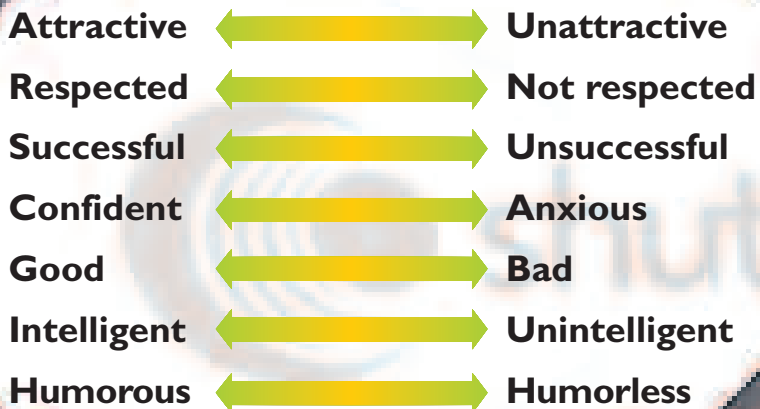
Significant others Individuals who influence your self-concept because you value their opinions, such as family, friends, co-workers, mentors

Reference groups Groups that influence your self-concept because you identify with and feel a part of them

Role A set of behaviors that are determined by a particular type of context or relationship

Self-Concept Continuum
RATE YOURSELF

Attractive	⟵⟶	**Unattractive**
Respected	⟵⟶	**Not respected**
Successful	⟵⟶	**Unsuccessful**
Confident	⟵⟶	**Anxious**
Good	⟵⟶	**Bad**
Intelligent	⟵⟶	**Unintelligent**
Humorous	⟵⟶	**Humorless**

Who would you be if you could not remember your parents or childhood playmates, your successes and failures, the places you lived, the schools you attended, the books you read, and the teams you played for?

The "self" generally is not perceived outside its relationship to the "other." Chapter 3, Understanding Others, focuses on how the characteristics and cultures of others affect how we communicate.

Assess Your Self

Self-appraisals are evaluations of your self-concept in terms of your abilities, attitudes, and behaviors. "Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is as important as the ones we pass on ourselves."[13]

"I'm not popular" or "I'm an excellent basketball player" are examples of self-appraisals. It is not surprising that when your appraisals are positive, you are more likely to succeed. Positive beliefs about your abilities can make you more persuasive when asking for a promotion or when dealing with rejection. At the same time, your mind may try to protect you from potentially hurtful or threatening feedback from others. These ego-defense mechanisms can mislead you into forming a distorted self-image:[14] "What's the big deal about being late to a meeting? She's just obsessed with time and took it out on me. It's no big deal."

Understandably, examining and understanding your self-concept is difficult because we tend to view ourselves favorably—often more favorably than we deserve. In his book *The Varnished Truth: Truth*

Self-appraisals Evaluations of your self-concept in terms of your abilities, attitude, and behavior

Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life, David Nyberg writes: "Human self-deception is one of the most impressive software programs ever devised."[15] Most of us seem to be "wired" to fool ourselves about ourselves, often deceiving ourselves about things we want to be true (but aren't).[16]

To minimize this kind of self-deception, you should enlist two forms of self-appraisals—actual performance and social comparison.

Actual Performance Your actual performance or behavior is the most influential source of self-appraisals.[17] If you repeatedly succeed at something, you are likely to evaluate your performance in that area positively. For example, if you were an "A" student in high school, you probably

Creating Our Selves Online

communication in ACTION

Researchers disagree on whether online communication harms or promotes the development of a self-concept. Some suggest that the limitless number of cyberspace communities with constantly changing contexts, significant others, and reference groups make it difficult for anyone to develop a stable self-identity.[18] Others argue that virtual communities provide opportunities to experiment with identities. For example, shy teenagers may feel more confident and comfortable communicating online than in face-to-face interactions. As they "try on" different selves online, positive feedback from virtual others can help them develop a stronger self-concept and a healthier self-esteem.[19]

The "evolution" of avatars has moved the notion of online identities into a new dimension. First appearing in video games during the 1990s, avatars have now been adopted by online communicators. An **avatar** is a user-created two- or three-dimensional human being who represents your self online. Avatars range from fantastical and bizarre to quite reasonable likenesses of the user. Second Life is just one example of a virtual world in which avatars live, behave, and socialize. In Second Life, you can create and customize your own digital, three-dimensional body, adding unique clothing, hair, and fashion accessories found in resident-owned shops. Hundreds of universities, school systems, and business around the world use Second Life for group-based instruction and conducting meetings.[20]

Unfortunately, the absence of *real*, face-to-face interactions makes it easier to distort aspects of your self, as well as to fabricate a false identity. Many people have been betrayed or seriously hurt by such deceptions—as in the tragic case of Megan Meier, who committed suicide after falling victim to the cruel torment of and rejection by a boy named Josh Evans, someone she'd met on MySpace. It turned out that Josh was actually a fictitious character created by Lori Drew, the mother of a former friend of Megan's. Drew, who created this false identity as a way of humiliating and punishing Megan for supposedly spreading rumors about Drew's daughter, was indicted on misdemeanor charges in November 2008, prompting a public outcry for legislation to prohibit harassment over the Internet. In July 2009, a federal judge threw out Drew's conviction and acquitted her of all charges.[21]

> **Avatar** A two- or three-dimensional human figure you create and use to represent yourself online

What would or does your avatar look like?

How We Make Ourselves Look Good

or less capable than your classmates. On the other hand, if everyone does poorly on the test, comparing yourself with your classmates may make you feel better about yourself because it means you did just as well as everyone else. We also compare ourselves with others in terms of appearance and physical ability. When people compare themselves with fashion models, alluring movie stars, and professional athletes, however, they have chosen an almost impossible ideal.

Social comparison The process of evaluating yourself in relation to the others in your reference groups

expect to be a good student in college. Thus, you may be disappointed or distressed if you receive a low grade and, as a result, doubt your academic and intellectual abilities.

Social Comparison According to social psychologist Leon Festinger, **social comparison** is the process of evaluating yourself in relation to the others in your reference groups.[23] The notion of "keeping up with the Joneses" is an example of our need to compare favorably with others. If you are the only one in the class who receives a failing grade on a test, you may conclude that you are less intelligent, less prepared,

Fashion models are a poor choice for social comparison.

building SELF-ESTEEM

now that you know something about your self-concept, how do you *feel* about yourself? Are you satisfied, discouraged, delighted, optimistic, surprised, or troubled? **Self-esteem** represents your judgments about your self.

Nathaniel Branden puts it this way: "Self-esteem is the reputation we acquire with ourselves."[24] Not surprisingly, your personal beliefs, behavior, and performance influence your level of self-esteem.

Self-esteem Your positive and negative judgments about your self-concept

Studies consistently find that people with high self-esteem are significantly happier than people with low self-esteem. They are also less likely to be depressed. One especially compelling study surveyed more than 13,000 college students. High self-esteem emerged as the strongest factor in overall life satisfaction.[25]

If your self-esteem isn't very high, you can take steps to improve it, such as through self-monitoring and learning new ways of communicating with others. There are several specific strategies you can try as well. Keep in mind that engaging in these practices requires persistence and effort.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

A prophecy is a prediction. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is "an impression formation process in which an initial impression elicits behavior ... that conforms to the impression."[26] More simply, it is a prediction you make that you cause to happen or become true. For example, if young girls are told that boys do better in mathematics, they may believe it and stop trying to succeed. As a result, they won't do as well in math as boys, just as predicted.

In one study, researchers administered a math test to different groups of women. Before taking the test, one group of women was told that that men and women do math equally well. Another group was told that there is a genetic difference in math ability that explains why women are not as good at math as men. The women in the first group got nearly twice as many right answers as those in the second group. The researchers concluded that people tend to accept genetic explanations as powerful and permanent, which can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

In her commencement address at Mount Holyoke College in 2009, the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, said: "When I was in my mid-teens, I announced at home that I had decided to become a lawyer. The first words I heard in response were, 'You can't because you are a woman.'"[27] President McAleese did not let these words and her parents' beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

High self-esteem will not solve all your personal problems, nor will it automatically improve your ability to communicate effectively and ethically. Educators have learned this lesson, much to the detriment of

Self-fulfilling prophecy An impression formation process in which an initial impression elicits behavior that conforms to the impression

Know Thy Self

Assess Your Self-Esteem

The statements below describe different ways of thinking about yourself. Read them carefully and choose the phrase that indicates how much you agree with each statement.[28]

strongly disagree (SD) disagree (D) agree (A) strongly agree (SA)

_____ 1. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

_____ 2. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

_____ 3. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

_____ 4. I certainly feel useless at times.

_____ 5. At times I think I am no good at all.

_____ 6. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

_____ 7. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

_____ 8. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

_____ 9. I feel that I do not have much to be proud of.

_____ 10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Scoring: Score items 1, 2, 6, 8, and 10 in a positive direction (i.e., strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, and so on) and items 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 in a negative direction (i.e., strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, and so forth). The highest possible score is 40 points; the lowest possible score is 10 points. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Please note that there are no good or bad scores; rather, the scale measures how you perceive your level of self-esteem.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE YOUR **SELF-ESTEEM**[29]

STRATEGY	EXCEPTION
Practice self-acceptance Recognize, accept, and "own" your thoughts, feelings, and behavior. You don't have to like your actions, but be willing to accept them as part of who you are. No one is perfect.	**But not as an excuse** **Self-acceptance** is not an excuse for bad behavior. If a boss shouts at employees and justifies it by saying, "I'm a very emotional man. If you can't take it, quit," he has taken the concept of self-acceptance to extremes.
Practice self-responsibility **Self-responsibility** means taking responsibility for your own happiness and for achieving your goals. If you assume responsibility for what you do, you are more likely to be happy and satisfied.	**But don't try to control everything** Resist the urge to control everything so you don't end up feeling overburdened, frustrated, and angry with others. Ask for and accept help when you need it.
Practice assertiveness Stand up for yourself in appropriate ways to satisfy your needs and pursue your goals. Don't become obsessed with getting approval from others.	**But respect the needs of others** Be assertive, not aggressive, when you pursue your goals. Don't stand in the way of others when you stand up for yourself.
Practice personal integrity **Personal integrity** means behaving in ways that are consistent with your values and beliefs. Do more than think about what you should do and actually do "the right thing."	**But understand and respect others** "The right thing" for you may not be "the right thing" for someone else. Make sure your actions do not offend or hurt others.
Practice positive self-talk **Self-talk** represents the silent statements you make to yourself about yourself. Replace negative, self-defeating statements with more positive and productive statements.	**But listen to others, too** Listening to yourself should never substitute for or prevent you from listening to others.

Mary McAleese, president of Ireland, did not let her parents' beliefs about the role of women deter her from achieving her personal and career goals.

students. For example, some well-meaning school systems have tried to raise the self-esteem of disadvantaged and failing students by passing them to the next grade. Unfortunately, such efforts have had no positive effects and demonstrated that inflating self-esteem by itself could actually decrease grades.[30]

Avoid the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Trap

To minimize the chances of falling into the self-fulfilling prophecy trap, ask yourself the following questions:

- What prediction am I making about the behavior of others?
- Why am I making this prediction? Is it justified?
- Am I doing anything to elicit the predicted response?
- What other behaviors could help avoid fulfilling my prophecy?

Researchers once assumed that people acted violently toward others because they suffered from low self-esteem; rather, the opposite seems to be true. Violent people often act the way they do because they suffer from *high*, but unrealistic, self-esteem. Violent criminals often describe themselves as superior to others. Even playground bullies regard themselves as superior to other children. Low self-esteem is found among the victims of bullies, but not among bullies themselves. In fact, most violent groups generally have belief systems that emphasize their superiority over others.[31] Someone with an overinflated sense of self-esteem may be a braggart, bully, or tyrant rather than a person with a healthy self-concept. Someone with lower self-esteem but a secure and confident sense of self can be a model of humility and goodness.

Self-acceptance A willingness to acknowledge your thoughts, feelings, and behavior, but not as an excuse for inappropriate behavior
Self-responsibility Being accountable for your own happiness and fulfillment of goals without trying to control everything and everyone
Personal integrity The practice of behaving in ways that are consistent with your values and beliefs while also understanding and respecting others
Self-talk The silent statements you make to yourself about yourself

Practice Positive Self-Talk

The first column in the following table provides examples of negative self-talk. In the second column, create a positive statement as a replacement. In the last two rows, provide examples of your own negative self-talk and then substitute a more positive statement for each of your examples.

Negative Self-Talk

Example: *I won't be able to work as quickly as the other group members.*
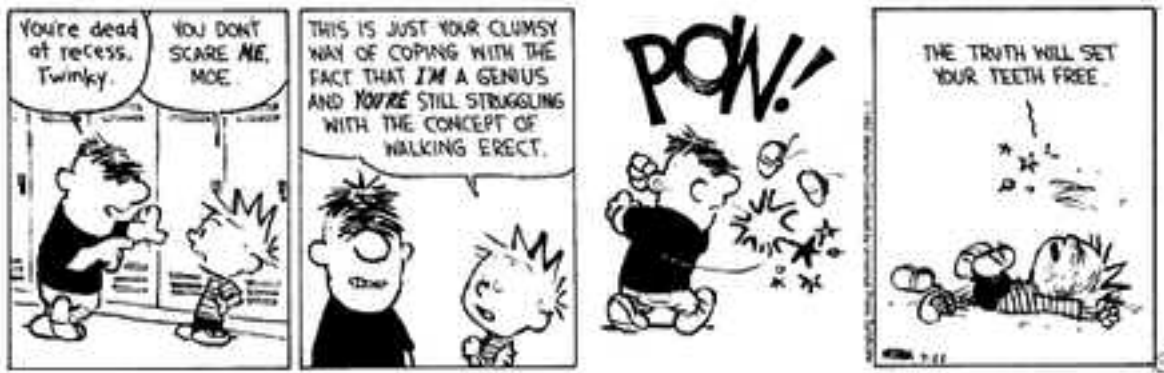
Other statement: _____

_____

Other statement: _____

_____

Positive Self-Talk

Example: *I'll do my best and ask for help if I need it.*

Other statement: _____

_____

Other statement: _____

_____

Here, the high-self esteemed playground bully demonstrates his sense of superiority over Calvin, the victim with low self esteem.

the power of PERCEPTION

Why does one person experience great satisfaction in a job whereas another person in the same job dreads it? Why do you find a speech inspiring whereas another person finds it offensive? The answer to these questions lies in one word: *perception*. Imagine that you and a colleague are chatting after a meeting. You say, "That was a good session. We got through all the issues and ended early." Your friend responds with "Are you kidding? Didn't you notice that Lynn rushed us through the agenda to avoid any serious discussion or disagreement?" What

happened here? You both attended the same meeting, but each of you perceived the experience quite differently.

From a communication point of view, we define **perception** as the process through which you select, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli in the world around you. The accuracy of your perceptions determines how well you interpret and evaluate experiences and the people you encounter. At the same time, once you reach a conclusion, it's of-

ten difficult to change your perception.

Generally, we trust our perceptions and treat them as accurate and reliable. We say things such as, "Seeing is believing," "I call it as I see it," or "I saw it with my own eyes." However, as Figure 2.1 shows, we can't always rely on what we see. Police officers know very well that three witnesses to a traffic accident may provide three different descriptions of the cars involved, the estimated speed they were traveling, and the physical characteristics of the drivers. In fact, eyewitness testi-

Perception The process we use to select, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli

Figure 2.1 Old Woman or Young Woman?

What you see depends on how your eyes selected graphic details, how you organized that information, and how you interpreted the results.

Figure 2.2 Reversible Images

Do you see a vase or two people facing each other in the figure? Depending on which elements of the figure you select, you will perceive different images.

Organization

Suppose you see a middle-aged woman wearing a suit walking across campus. You conclude she is a professor. You also observe a young man entering a classroom wearing a school sweatshirt and carrying a backpack that appears to be loaded with textbooks. You assume he is a student. You took the information, or stimuli, you observed and categorized it into "professor" and "student." What these two scenarios demonstrate is how *context* influences the way you organize information. For example, you could conclude that a woman in a suit on campus is a professor, but in a different context, you might conclude that she is a business executive. You may conclude that a young man wearing a school sweatshirt and carrying books on campus is a student, but backstage in a theater, you may decide that he is an actor or stagehand.

Figure–ground principle A perception principle that explains why we focus on certain features—the figure—while deemphasizing less relevant stimuli—the ground

mony, although persuasive, is often one of the least reliable forms of courtroom evidence.

Even though you run the risk of drawing incorrect conclusions, you would be lost in a confusing world without your perceptions. Not only does perception help you make sense out of other people's behavior, it helps you decide what you will say or do. Suppose you notice that your boss keeps track of employees who arrive late and leave early, and that she rarely grants these employees the special privileges given to those who put in full workdays. These perceptions tell you that it is a good idea to arrive early and stay late if you want a positive evaluation or a future promotion.

There are three components to perception: selection, organization, and interpretation.

Selection

You use your senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch) to notice and choose from the many stimuli around you. Your needs, wants, interests, moods, and memories largely determine which stimuli you will select. For example, when your eyes and ears detect something fa-
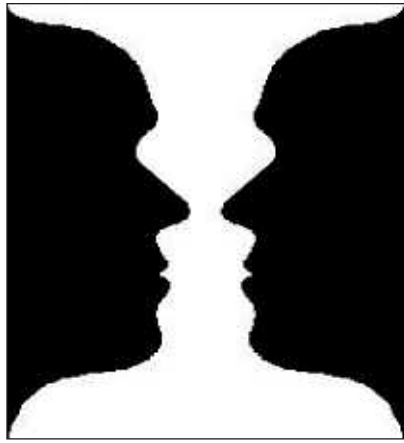
miliar or potentially interesting as you flip through television channels, you stop. Or you may be daydreaming in class, but when your professor says, "The following chapters will be covered on the next test," you find yourself paying full attention again.

The optical illusion in Figure 2.2 illustrates the **figure–ground principle** of perception: we focus on certain features (the figure) while deemphasizing less relevant background stimuli (the ground).[32] Thus, while walking down the street, if you notice someone standing against a building, that's what you would see first: a person standing against a building, not a building with a person-shaped hole in it.[33] In communication, you see your friend smile and hear her tell you everything is okay. However, you focus your attention on her red and swollen eyes, suspect she has been crying, and conclude that she is upset. Her smile and verbal assurances are relegated to the background. Ultimately, what you select to focus on will affect how you organize and interpret the events around you *and* how well you communicate in those situations.

Is this woman a college student? an instructor? a store clerk? an attorney? a business executive?

# communication&culture

The mental process of perception is the same across cultures. Everyone selects, organizes, and interprets stimuli. However, your culture influences *what* you notice, *how* you organize that information, and *how* you interpret information and situations. Psychologist Richard Nisbett argues that each culture can "literally experience the world in very different ways."[34] Look, for example, at the three objects depicted on your right. Which two objects would you pair together?

People from Western cultures are more likely to put the chicken and cow together because they are both animals. East Asians, however, are more likely to pair the cow and the grass because cows eat grass. According to Nesbitt, East Asians perceive the world in terms of relationships whereas Westerners are inclined to see objects that can be grouped into categories. As Chapter 3, Understanding Others, explains, many cultures—and East Asian cultures in particular—are more sensitive to the context in which communication takes place. As Rudyard Kipling wrote in *The Ballad of East and West*, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."
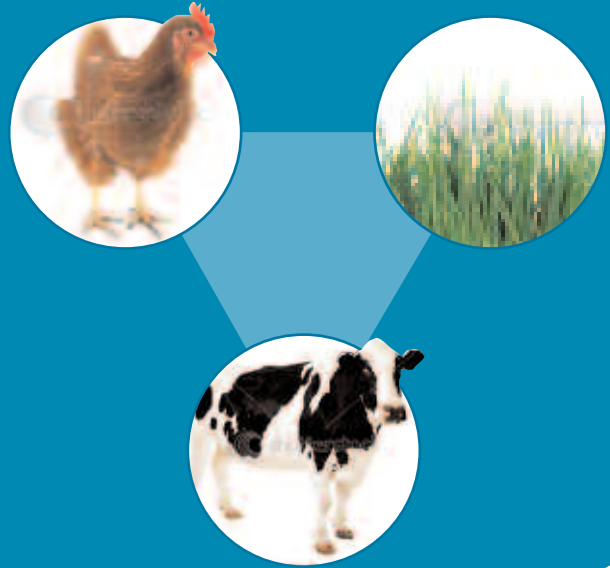
You sort and arrange the sensory stimuli you select into useful categories based on your knowledge and past experiences with similar stimuli. Four principles influence how you organize or categorize information: the **proximity principle**, the **similarity principle**, the **closure principle**, and the **simplicity principle**.[35]

The Proximity Principle The closer objects, events, or people are to one another, the more likely you will perceive them as belonging together.[36] You go to a restaurant to eat lunch alone, and another person whom you do not know gets in line behind you. The host asks, "Two for lunch?" When you don't want to be perceived as associated with an individual, you may move away from that person to create greater physical distance.

The Similarity Principle Similar elements or people are more likely to be perceived as part of a group. When two individuals share one characteristic or trait, you may conclude that they also have other things in common. For example, you meet a person from Texas and assume that she enjoys country music because other Texans you know listen to that kind of music. Unfortunately, the similarity principle can lead to stereotyping and inaccurate conclusions. Your new acquaintance may dislike country music but love jazz.

The Closure Principle We often fill in missing elements to form a more complete impression of an object, person, or event. Look, for example, at Figure 2.3.
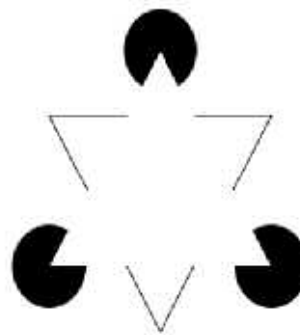
Figure 2.3   How Many Triangles Do You See?

Some people see as many as 11 triangles in this drawing. However, given that a triangle is a figure with three attached sides, there are no triangles. If you saw triangles, you mentally filled in or "closed" the image's elements.

Proximity principle A perception principle that explains why the closer items or people are to one another, the more they are perceived as belonging together

Similarity principle A perception principle that explains why similar items or people are more likely to be perceived as a group

Closure principle A perception principle that explains why we often fill in missing elements in order to form a more complete impression of an object, person, or event

Simplicity principle A perception principle that explains why we tend to organize information in a way that provides the simplest interpretation of objects, people, or experiences

In what ways does this photo illustrate how select and organize stimuli to reach conclusions about their meaning?

- *Relational involvement.* This is really important to your friend.

These same factors may also lead to inaccurate perceptions. For example, suppose your best friend's ex-husband is hired to work in your department. You believe that he treats your friend badly and now you will have to endure his inconsiderate attitude and carelessness at work. However, everyone else—supervisors, co-workers, and customers—seem pleased with him. Clearly, your previous experience may create an unfair or erroneous perception of his work.

Perception Checking

Psychologists Richard Block and Harold Yuker point out that "perception often is a poor representation of reality. Yet it is important to recognize that a person's behavior is controlled less by what is actually true, than what the person believes is true. Perceptions may be more important than reality in determining behavior!"[39]

The Simplicity Principle We tend to organize information in a way that provides the simplest interpretation. For example, on a cloudy day, you look out the window and see that the sidewalk is wet, and think that it must have rained. This is a reasonable and simple conclusion. However, there may be other explanations for the wet sidewalk, like automatic sprinklers or a leak in a water pipe, but you chose the simplest one first.

Interpretation

A number of factors influence your interpretation of experiences. Suppose a friend asks you to volunteer your time over the weekend to help build a house for Habitat for Humanity. The following factors may affect your interpretation and reaction to your friend's request:

- *Past experiences.* After volunteering at a soup kitchen last year, you felt really good about yourself.
- *Knowledge.* You spent a summer working as a house painter and believe that you have something useful to contribute.

- *Expectations.* It sounds like fun, and you might meet some interesting people.
- *Attitudes.* You believe that volunteering in the community is important.

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The Golden Rule Does Not Always Apply

The Golden Rule, "Do to others what you would have them do to you," comes from the New Testament (Matthew 7:12).[37] However, what you would do is not necessarily what another person wants you to do. In his *Maxims for Revolutionists*, playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote, "The golden rule is that there are no golden rules. ... Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same."[38] Thus, if you wish to follow the Golden Rule, consider these two cautions:

- Consider how another person may perceive the situation differently than you do.
- Look for solutions that would be appropriate and fair from someone else's point of view or culture.

You can improve the accuracy of your perceptions by pausing to check the basis for your conclusions. **Perception checking** involves noticing and analyzing how you select, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli, whether you consider alternative interpretations, and whether you try to verify your perceptions with others.[40]

Perception checking
A method for testing the accuracy of perceptual interpretations

PERCEPTION CHECKING GUIDELINES

1 How do factors such as personal biases, your level of self-awareness, past experiences, your cultural background, or the influence of others affect your perceptions?

2 Do you perceive a situation the same way others do? If not, how can you adapt to their perceptions?

3 How does the way you select, organize, interpret information, and reach conclusions affect your reasons for communicating?

4 How does the psychosocial, logistical, and interactional communication context affect your perceptions and the perceptions of others?

5 How do your perceptions affect the content you choose for a message?

6 How do your perceptions affect the way you organize ideas and information in a message? Could others interpret your meaning differently based on the way you organize the content?

7 How do your perceptions affect the way you express your message and choose communication channels?

communicating
WITH CONFIDENCE

your self-concept and level of self-confidence directly affect how successfully you communicate.[41] Most of us see ourselves as bright and hardworking. At the same time, all of us have occasional doubts and insecurities. If you lack confidence, you are less likely to share what you know or voice your opinions. But when you feel good about yourself, you can engage in a conversation with ease, defend your ideas in a group, and give successful presentations.

Most people experience some anxiety when they are in an important communication situation. In fact, that "keyed-up" feeling is a positive and normal reaction, and demonstrates that you care about what you have to say.

Communication Apprehension
The anxiety you may experience when speaking to others is referred to by many names: *speech anxiety*, *stage*

fright, and *communication apprehension*. **Communication apprehension** is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another

Communication apprehension
An individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons

person or persons."[42] It occurs in a variety of communication contexts, such as group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, public speaking, and job interviews.

Communication apprehension is not just "in your head;" it is a type of stress that manifests in real physiological responses. Physical reactions such as sweaty palms, perspiring, a fast pulse, shallow breathing, cold extremities, flushed skin, nausea, trembling hands, quivering legs, or "butterflies" in the stomach are the body's response to the release of hormones such as adrenaline.[43]

National surveys have discovered that fear of snakes and fear of speaking in public are the top two common fears among North Americans, way ahead of fear of heights, anxieties about financial problems, and even fear of death. Fortunately, you can learn how to reduce your anxieties and transform that energy into effective communication.

Strategies for Becoming a Confident Communicator

Despite your worst fears, most people are kind and willing to forgive and forget a mistake. No one expects you to be perfect. Also, remember that in most cases, your anxiety is invisible. We can't see your pounding heart, upset stomach, cold hands, or worried thoughts. Most of us think we display more anxiety than listeners report noticing. However, the fact that your anxiety is often invisible to others does not make it feel any less real to you. Fortunately, there are a number of strategies to reduce your anxiety and help you become a more confident communicator.

Prepare Although you may not be able to predict unexpected situations or anticipate the nature of everyday conversations, you can prepare for many of the communication situations you encounter. For instance, you can prepare for a job interview

or performance appraisal, a staff meeting or professional seminar, and a public speech or presentation. Thorough preparation changes the unfamiliar into something familiar. With good preparation, you will know a great deal about the ideas you wish to discuss, the others who will be involved, the context of the situation, the content and structure of your message, and how you will express your message.

Relax, Re-think, Re-vision By learning to relax your body, you can reduce your level of communication apprehension. However, a relaxed body is only half the battle; you also need to change the way you think about communication.[44] When you have confident thoughts ("I know I can persuade this group to join the Animal Rescue League"), you begin to feel more confident. The following strategies can help you rethink your attitudes, visualize your message, and relax your body:

Communication Apprehension

THINK ABOUT THEORY

Since the early 1970s, the study of communication apprehension has been a major research focus in the communication discipline. Leading researcher James C. McCroskey explains that "it permeates every facet of an individual's life," including major decisions such as career and housing choices, as well as affects the quality of our communication behavior in a variety of interpersonal, small group, social, educational, work, and public settings.[45]

In the beginning, when McCroskey began studying communication apprehension, he believed that it was a

"learned trait, one that is conditioned through reinforcements of the child's communication behavior."[46] More recently, he has argued that a person's environment or situation has only a small effect on that person's level of anxiety. He now believes that communication apprehension is a relatively permanent personality trait, "an expression of principally inborn neurobiological functioning."[47]

Communication apprehension, concludes McCroskey, is "probably the most important factor in causing ineffective communication. ... For those of

us who experience [communication apprehension] to the point that it interferes with our daily lives or stands in our way of personal or professional success, we need not accept this as something we have to endure. ... Communication apprehension can be reduced by a variety of methods and has already [been] so reduced for literally thousands of individuals."[48] The remainder of this chapter provides a deeper understanding of communication apprehension and a variety of methods for reducing its effects.

Sources of COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

The process of managing communication apprehension begins with recognizing why you feel anxious when speaking to an individual, group, or audience. Although everyone has personal reasons for nervousness, researchers have identified some of the key fears that underlie communication apprehension.[49]

Many researchers claim that the fear of a negative evaluation is the number-one cause of communication anxiety.[50] When you focus your thoughts on the possibility of failure, you are more likely to fail. Try to shift your focus to the positive feedback you see from others—a nod, a smile, or an alert look. When you sense that a listener likes you and your message, you may gain the extra confidence you need.

Most people fear the unknown. Performing an un-unfamiliar or unexpected role can transform a usually confident person into a tangle of nerves. If you are attending an event as an audience member and suddenly are called on to introduce a guest to the audience, you can become very unsettled. Similarly, most people feel stressed when interviewing for a job in an office they've never been to and with a person they hardly know. If you've been promoted to a leadership position and are now "the boss," you may feel less comfortable communicating with the colleagues you now supervise.

"Three strikes and you're out" works in baseball, and "What goes up must come down" makes sense in physics, but the rules of communication are not hard and fast and should not be treated as though they are enforceable laws. For example, novice speakers sometimes over-rehearse to the point of sounding robotic for fear of saying "uh" or "um" in a pre-sentation. Good communicators learn not to "sweat the small stuff" and that, sometimes, "rules" should be bent or broken.

FEAR of Failure

FEAR of Breaking the Rules

FEAR of the Unknown

Do you get nervous when interacting with people who have more status or power, education or experience, fame or popularity? Fear of others can be heightened when talking to a powerful person, an influential group, or a large audience. Usually, this fear is based on an exaggerated feeling of being different from or inferior to others. If you don't know much about the people around you, you are more likely to feel apprehensive. Learning more about your listeners or even your classmates can decrease your anxiety. You may have more in common with them than you realize.

FEAR of Others

FEAR of the Spotlight

Although a little attention may be flattering, being the center of attention makes many people nervous. Psychologist Peter Desberg puts it this way: If you were performing as part of a choir, you'd probably feel much calmer than if you were singing a solo.[51] The more self-focused you are, the more nervous you become. This is especially true when giving a presentation to an audience. Try to stay focused on your purpose and message, rather than allowing yourself to be distracted by the spotlight.

- **Cognitive restructuring** is a method for reducing anxiety by replacing negative, irrational thoughts with more realistic, positive self-talk. The next time you feel anxious, tell yourself any one of these positive statements: "My message is important" and "I am a well-prepared, skilled communicator." Or, "I know more about this than the audience does" and "I've done this before, so I'm not going to be as nervous as I've been in the past."
- **Visualization** is a powerful method for building confidence, and it allows you to imagine what it would be like to experience an entire communication act. Find a quiet place, relax, and imagine

Cognitive restructuring A method of reducing communication apprehension by replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones

Visualization A method of reducing communication apprehension through the process of imagining an entire performance in a communication situation

yourself walking into the room with confidence and energy. Think about the smiles you'll receive as you talk, the heads nodding in agreement, and the look of interest in the eyes of your listeners. By visualizing yourself communicating effectively, you are mentally practicing the skills you need to succeed while also building a positive self-image.

- **Systematic desensitization** is a relaxation and visualization technique developed by psychologist Joseph Wolpe to reduce the anxiety associated with stressful situations.[52] You start with deep muscle relaxation. In this relaxed state, you then deliberately imagine yourself in a variety of communication contexts ranging from very comfortable to highly stressful. By working to remain relaxed while visualizing various situations, you will gradually associate communication with relaxation rather than nervousness.

Focus One of the best ways to build confidence is to concentrate on your message. Anxiety only draws your attention away from your message and directs it to your fears. When you focus on getting your message across, you don't have time to think about how you might look or sound. This strategy can reduce your level of anxiety and improve your communication.

Practice The best way to become good at something is to practice, regardless of whether it's cooking, serving a tennis ball, or communicating. You can practice wording a request or expressing an emotion to another person, answering questions in an interview, stating your position at a meeting, or making a presentation to an audience.

In addition to enhancing your confidence, practice stimulates your brain in positive ways. As Daniel Goleman notes in *Social Intelligence*, "Simulating an act is, in the brain, the same as performing it."[53] Practicing communication mentally and physically is as important as practicing the piano or a gymnastics routine. Skilled pianists and medal-winning gymnasts spend hours practicing, so at the very least, communicators should practice what they intend to say to others before they say it.

Even rock stars like Sting practice meditation and other relaxation techniques that can transform nervousness and anxiety into calmness and confidence.

Systematic desensitization A method of reducing communication apprehension through deep muscle relaxation and visualization

Know Thy Self

Work Toward Calm Through Systematic Desensitization

The following hierarchy of anxiety-producing communication situations[54] range from least likely to most likely to produce stress. Assess for yourself which of these situations produce the most anxiety; then, as you visualize each context, try to remain calm and relaxed.

1. You are talking to your best friend in person.
2. You are being introduced to a new acquaintance by your best friend.
3. You have to talk to a small group of people, all of whom you know well.
4. You are at a social gathering where you don't know anyone but are expected to meet and talk to others.
5. You are talking to someone in a supervisory role about a problem at work or school.
6. You are going to ask someone to go to a party with you.
7. You are going on a job interview.
8. You have been asked to give a presentation in front of a large group of people.
9. You are to appear on a television show with other panelists to talk about a topic you know well.
10. You are to appear on a television show and debate another person.

Communication ASSESSMENT

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)[55] is composed of 24 statements concerning feelings about communication with other people. Indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are undecided, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree. Work quickly; record your first impression.

_____ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.

_____ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.

_____ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.

_____ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

_____ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in a group discussion.

_____ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.

_____ 8. Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in a meeting.

_____ 9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.

_____ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.

_____ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me feel uncomfortable.

_____ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.

_____ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.

_____ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.

_____ 15. Ordinarily, I am very tense and nervous in conversations.

_____ 16. Ordinarily, I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

_____ 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.

_____ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.

_____ 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.

_____ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am giving a speech.

_____ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

_____ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

_____ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

_____ 24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Scoring: As you score each subcategory, begin with a score of 18 points. Then add or subtract from 18 based on the following instructions:

Subscores	Scoring Formula
Group discussions	18 + scores for items 2, 4, and 6; − scores for items 1, 3, and 5
Meetings	18 + scores for items 8, 9, and 12; − scores for items 7, 10, and 11
Interpersonal conversations	18 + scores for items 14, 16, and 17; − scores for items 13, 15, and 18
Public speaking	18 + scores for items 19, 21, and 23; − scores for items 20, 22, and 24

To obtain your total score for the PRCA, add your four subscores together. Your score should range between 24 points and 120 points.

Norms for PRCA

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total score	65.5	15.3
Group	15.4	4.8
Meetings	16.4	4.8
Interpersonal	14.5	4.2
Public speaking	19.3	5.1

Summary

How do *your* characteristics, perceptions, and confidence affect the way you communicate?

- Your self-concept is largely determined by your level of self-awareness, the influence of other people, past experiences, and your cultural perspectives.
- The influence of other people—significant others, reference groups, your roles, and the rewards you receive from others—is a powerful determinant of your self-concept.
- Beware of self-fulfilling prophecies, which are predictions that directly or indirectly cause themselves to become true.
- You can minimize self-deception and trust your view of your self by objectively assessing your own behavior and by comparing yourself to others.

What communication strategies and skills can enhance your self-esteem?

- You can enhance your self-esteem by practicing self-acceptance, self-responsibility, self-assertiveness, personal integrity, and self-talk.
- Practice converting negative self-talk about yourself into positive self-talk.

How do your perceptions affect the way you select, organize, and interpret the world around you?

- Perception is the process through which you select, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli in the world around you.
- Your needs, wants, interests, moods, and memories largely determine which stimuli you will select.
- Four principles that influence how you organize information are the proximity, similarity, closure, and simplicity principles.
- Your past experiences, knowledge, expectations, attitudes, and relationships affect how you interpret and react to people and events.
- When you engage in perception checking, apply all seven guiding principles of communication to the situation.

How do you become a more confident communicator?

- *Communication apprehension* refers to an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons.
- Sources of communication apprehension include fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of the spotlight, fear of others, and fear of breaking the supposed rules.
- Strategies for reducing your level of communication apprehension include (a) being prepared, (b) physical relaxation, (c) cognitive restructuring, (d) visualization, (e) systematic desensitization, (f) focusing, and (g) practicing.

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TEST your *knowledge*

1. Most infants begin to recognize themselves in a mirror _____ months of age.
   a. by 6
   b. between 6 and 12
   c. between 12 and 18
   d. between 18 and 24
   e. after 24

2. If you tell your parents that you'll never become a doctor because you're not a good science student, you may not pursue this career goal. Which aspect of self-concept may be responsible for your decision?
   a. self-awareness
   b. self-monitoring
   c. self-assertiveness
   d. self-fulfilling prophecy
   e. self-disclosure

3. Which of the following techniques for improving self-esteem can help you stop blaming others for your failures?
   a. self-talk
   b. personal integrity
   c. self-assertiveness
   d. self-responsibility
   e. self-acceptance

4. Which answers is an example of someone who tells you to accept her disruptive behavior because it is just who she is?
   a. She rarely stands up for herself in appropriate ways.
   b. She always reacts in a way that is consistent with her values and beliefs.
   c. She engages in negative rather than positive self-talk.
   d. She suffers from high but unrealistic self-esteem.
   e. She justifies her unfriendliness by saying that's just her leadership style.

5. Your textbook uses the example of eyewitness testimony to illustrate
   a. the power of self-concept.
   b. the inaccuracies in human perception.
   c. the role of selection in the perception process.
   d. the role of organization in the perception process.
   e. the role of interpretation in the perception process.

6. When a mother sees blood on her daughter's sleeve, she assumes that her daughter has been badly hurt in an accident. This is an example of
   a. the proximity principle.
   b. the similarity principle.
   c. the closure principle.
   d. the simplicity principle.
   e. the complexity principle.

7. Which guiding principle helps you check your perceptions?
   a. Know Thy Self
   b. Connect with Others
   c. Determine Your Purpose
   d. Select Appropriate Content
   e. all of the above

8. Why doesn't the Golden Rule always work?
   a. Because you have to get to know your neighbor very well before you can "love thy neighbor as thyself."
   b. Because "turning the other cheek" may not help you understand another person's motives.
   c. Because sacrificing yourself for the sake of others may help the other person, but be very detrimental to you.
   d. "Honoring thy father and mother" all of the time may prevent you from realizing your own potential.
   e. Because if you "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," you may discover that the other person may not want the same things you do.

9. Which communication scholar has done the most research on communication apprehension?
   a. Hermann Rorschach
   b. Daniel Goleman
   c. James McCroskey
   d. Min-Sun Kim
   e. Leon Festinger

10. Which strategy for reducing your level of communication apprehension involves replacing negative, irrational thoughts with more realistic, positive self-talk?
    a. Be prepared.
    b. Use cognitive restructuring.
    c. Imagine what it would be like to experience an entire communication act successfully.
    d. Use systematic desensitization.
    e. Focus on your message and practice that message.

Answers: 1-d; 2-d; 3-d; 4-e; 5-b; 6-d; 7-e; 8-e; 9-c; 10-b;