

Expressing Affection: A Vocabulary of Loving Messages

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Although sharing affection is central to relational maintenance, many well-intended attempts at displaying affection miss their mark. The intended recipient of the caring message misinterprets the messages, wishes for a different sign of affection or does not respond in the desired way. In his book, *Gifts from the Heart*, Randy Fujishin examines the many ways to share affection. He asserts that body language provides the most powerful form of communicating caring, and says "whether it's the reassuring pat on the back from a friend, the gentle kiss of a mother, or the familiar touch of a lover, body language conveys an important message—the gift of showing you care" (1998, p. 102). In *Hold Me Tight*, a book intended to help couples build stronger emotional ties, therapist Sue Johnson (2008) argues that the way to enhance a relationship is to reestablish the emotional connection through openness and to be responsive and attuned to the other person. This good advice succeeds only if both partners can work together to make this emotional connection.

In the following article, Charles Wilkinson and Lauren Grill discuss the various ways people express affection to others and the difficulty that can arise when you can't construct loving messages

in the way your partners or friends need to hear them. These authors describe the many good, well-meaning individuals who experience relationship problems because they "don't speak the same language" as their friend or romantic partner. In other words, they do not share the same meanings for what counts as affection.

If you think of your family-of-origin as your first communication classroom, as described in Chapter 13 you will realize how much you learned about how to share or withhold affection. This background, coupled with your cultural heritage, your gender socialization and individual experiences, provided a solid base from which to construct your "affection vocabulary" or the ways in which you would expect to express and receive affection.

But your goals are not always reached. For example, painful relational breakdowns occur when Partner A tries so hard to indicate caring by giving gifts or making special meals while Partner B waits for a hug. The situation becomes even more complex when Partner B reaches out through touch and caring words and Partner A doesn't reciprocate.

In the following piece, the authors develop a set of various communication strategies that

can indicate caring; they range from direct verbal statements to doing favors. They assert that the key to success depends on the similarity of the relational participants' values; any loving behavior is valid, if both parties interpret and value it in similar ways. After briefly describing the many ways in which people share affection, Wilkinson and Grill develop three specific relational currencies—direct relational statements, self-disclosure, and gifts. Each of these is commonly used to send "I care" messages, with very different effects.

As you read this piece, consider how participants in a particular relationship try to reach out to each other and evaluate their effectiveness. As you read this chapter consider the question: How satisfied am I with the ways I share affection in friendship and family relationships and what changes might I wish to make in how I use relational currencies?

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INTRODUCTION

How did you know you were loved as a child? Did someone tease you, give you a backrub, surprise you with a present, fix your meals, listen to your troubles, hug you goodnight? Every family implicitly and explicitly teaches its members specific ways to show caring for others and to accept caring from others. Growing up, we all learn specific nurturing behaviors. You learned to use and expect certain behaviors and not to use or to expect others. You were taught the rules for how affection should or should not be shared, and how intensely it should be expressed. In addition you learned appropriate nurturing messages for males and females, older and younger persons, immediate family and friends. Some of these lessons reflected your family's cultural background. In short, part of growing up consisted of a series of family lessons on communicating affection. Thus everyone, knowingly and unknowingly, develops a specific set of acceptable ways of sharing affection

within his or her family-of-origin, the first words of a vocabulary of caring. It is important to note that, although many people follow their family-of-origin patterns, others deliberately choose to alter them. For example, in their study of father-son affection Floyd and Morman (2000) found that men who were most affectionate with their sons had fathers who were either highly affectionate or highly unaffectionate. In such cases sons either followed their fathers' modeling or compensated for the lack of affection by demonstrating strong affection when they became fathers.

Verbal and nonverbal messages which carry meaning about the caring dimension of human relationships may be called "relational currencies." Although the concept of "currency" reflects an economic model of investing or trading, within a communication framework, relational currencies can be considered part of a symbolic exchange process. As partners share relational currencies, they form understandings about "what counts for what"; this either strengthen or limit their relationship worldview. When the same currencies are equally valued, this agreement enhances attempt to communicate affection.

The ways you learned to show affection to friends and relatives are not necessarily similar to what other people learn. Growing up, you gradually became aware that others expressed caring differently, and you also learned to appreciate and use some of the nurturing messages taught to you by others. Occasionally you also have been surprised or angered by the insensitive ways others expressed caring, resisting their intensity or their actions.

Friends from different cultures can value different ways of sharing affection. One may be very expressive, physically hugging and touching; another may be very reserved but brings you wonderful gifts of food. Cross-gender relationships are sources of confusion regarding the most comfortable ways to show affection (Wood & Inman 1993). These differences may have broadened your ways of thinking about affection.

One of the most frustrating relational experiences occurs when someone you care about does not respond with the intensity you expect or becomes silent or distant. It hurts when

another does not understand your attempts to show affection and when you feel unloved by the responses from someone you care about.

The most painful experiences in some partnerships occur when members value different ways of sharing affection. Many husbands and wives feel unloved because their spouses never seem to do the "right thing"—to send the expected or desired caring message. According to Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, when couples are in the dating phase of their relationship, they often shower each other with a variety of loving messages and gestures to accommodate the needs of their partner to feel special and loved. Over time, however, partners reduce the frequency and variety of these messages, usually favoring the messages that mean the most to themselves, and not necessarily their partners or spouses. As each person grew up learning a different set of loving behaviors from their families, their "I care" messages may look and feel very different from each other. Naturally, when members move away from their families they carry their relational currency patterns with them. When these patterns are not shared over time between romantic partners, their loving vocabularies bypass each other.

In their early work on relational communication, Villard and Whipple (1976) discuss intimate and economic relational currencies, or communication behaviors that convey affection. Proponents of transactional analysis also discuss currencies for expressing affection (Berne 1964). In his discussion of communication skills in loving relationships, Fujishin (1998) refers to them as ways of showing caring. Just as children learn verbal language and expand their vocabularies as they encounter new objects, people, and ideas, so too, they learn a vocabulary of loving behaviors which should expand as they mature and encounter new people and ideas. The vocabulary learned initially in the family-of-origin influences greatly any development of a lifetime loving vocabulary.

Being conscious of such a vocabulary helps individuals identify their particular patterns of expressing affection, and examine how those patterns fit or miss the needs of their significant others—partners, parents, children, extended

Direct relational statement	Gifts
Positive verbal statements	Money
Self-disclosure	Food
Listening	Favors
Staying in touch	Service
Nonverbal expressiveness	Time together
Touch	Access rights
Sexuality	
Aggression	

(Adapted from Villard & Whipple, 1976.)

Figure 17-1

families, and friends. In more emotionally distanced families each member has a small number of loving behaviors which coordinate with the specific relational currencies used or valued by the others. There are many possible patterned messages for conveying affection.

Each of the following (Figure 17-1) represents one way of sharing affection. The use of each must be considered within the contexts of gender, culture, and developmental stage (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005; Wood, 2007).

OVERVIEW OF CURRENCIES

Direct Relational Statements

Such statements include oral and written messages that directly indicate love or caring. In some relationships, people express affection easily, saying "I love you" directly and frequently. Others may view such directness as unacceptable, preferring to save such words for special occasions (weddings, homecomings) or crisis situations. A study of statements of love within birthday cards reveals that the recipients of such affectionate messages are most often female relatives (Mooney & Brabant 1988).

Positive Verbal Statements

Such statements include oral and written messages that directly or indirectly indicate support, praise, or liking. Compliments, encouragement, indications, pleasure, involvement ("I'm really glad

you decided to come, I missed you") may convey liking or affection. A "Thinking of you" card or a phone call or e-mail to "touch base" also conveys involvement and caring.

Self-Disclosure

Voluntarily telling someone personal information about yourself that the other is unlikely to discover from other sources serves as a means of deepening understanding and trust between people. To be considered a relational currency, self-disclosure must be intentionally meant to demonstrate caring and investment in a relationship.

Listening

A frequently underappreciated communication behavior, listening carries a message of involvement with, and attention to, another person. More than any other currency, it communicates *presence*. True empathetic listening requires focused energy and practice. "It's a mental habit at which one has to work" (Ryan & Ryan, 1982, p. 44). Listening may be taken for granted unless the speaker is sensitive to the listener's careful attention.

Staying in Touch

Staying in touch implies efforts to maintain important relational ties, often across significant distances. Traditionally, this process involved sending cards and gifts or long-distance phone calls. Today, however, many friends and family members remain in close connection through the use of cell phones, e-mail, and the Internet. Dating partners may IM or text message each other 4 or 5 times a day; parents and college students may check in regularly over e-mail. Many grandparents are getting online to participate in the family's round-robin e-mails or check updates on the family website. Facebook has also changed the ways friends and family members may stay in touch online, reading each other's status updates and posting on each other's walls. The ease of everyday interaction has helped to maintain many friendships or extended family ties that might have frayed in the past. Even if the words are not affectionate, the effort to stay in touch is symbolic of caring.

Nonverbal Expressiveness

Spontaneous displays of affection, best characterized as love "in that 'eyes lighting up' sense" (Malone & Malone, 1987, p. 14) are referred to as nonverbal expressiveness. Nonverbal symbols such as facial expressions, outstretched arms, or general exuberance convey delight at the other's presence.

Touch

Touch is the language of physical intimacy. Positive physical contact carries a range of messages about friendship, concern, love, or sexual interest. Touch may serve as a significant indicator or "tie sign" (Goffman, 1959) of interpersonal connection to outsiders. Because touching behaviors vary greatly across genders and cultures they may be easily misinterpreted.

Sexuality

For adult partners, sexuality provides a unique opportunity for intimacy. The discourse surrounding intercourse and the act itself combine to create a powerful message of affection as long as both partners interpret the meaning of their sexual exchange in the same way.

Aggression

Aggression connotes actions usually thought to be incompatible with affection. Yet aggressive actions may serve as the primary emotional connection between members of certain families, especially within sibling relationships. Some people find it difficult to express intimacy directly; in these cases, verbal or physical aggression can serve as a means to feel connected and thus can be a sign of caring. For example, some friends and relatives may use sarcasm, teasing, tickling, or put downs as attempts at staying connected with others. Some conflictual couples may maintain their contact through bickering and disagreements. An individual who typically avoids conflict may indicate caring by engaging in an argument with a loved one as a way to stay connected.

Gifts

Gifts are symbols of affection that may be complicated by issues of cost, appropriateness,

and reciprocity. Gifts may signal of a person's intentions about future investment in a relationship (Camerer 1988). The thought and consideration involved in the process of identifying, selecting, and presenting the gift communicates the degree of caring and love symbolized in the gift (Chapman, 2004).

Money

Dollars and cents symbolize the economic nature of an exchange of currencies. Money must be given or loaned as a sign of affection and not an obligation if the act is to convey caring.

Food

A symbol of nurturing in many cultures, food preparation has emerged as a sign of caring in romantic and immediate family relationships, in addition to its historical place in inter-generational methods of affection.

Favors

Performing helpful acts for others may be complicated by norms of reciprocity and equality. Favors, to be considered signs of affection, must be performed willingly rather than in response to a friend, partner or relative's order. The underlying message of an action may be missed if the effort behind the favor is not appreciated.

Service

Service implies that a favor has evolved into a habitual behavior. Driving the carpool, making the coffee in the morning, or maintaining the checkbook may have begun as favors and moved into routines. People often continue such habits out of caring and consideration of others' needs, yet such services frequently go unnoticed or are taken for granted, thus negating the underlying message of affection.

Time Together

Being together, whether it's just "hanging out" or voluntarily accompanying someone on a trip or errand carries the message "I want to be with you." This is a subtle message with potential for being overlooked, although it is particularly important

for maintaining many close relationships. "Staying in touch" is a variation on this relational currency.

Access Rights

Allowing another person to use or borrow things you value conveys affection when the permission is intended as a sign of caring. The key to this relational message is the exclusive nature of granting permission, the underlying assumption being that not "just anyone" can have access to your belongings, only people you care about.

Clearly some of these categories overlap, and they also may vary based upon cultural heritage, personal experiences and observations. You may think of caring behaviors that do not seem to fit with these categories. Yet, for most people, these specific behaviors represent major ways of showing affection or of receiving affection. Some of these behaviors will send a more direct message than others—but all can be powerful indicators of caring and affection if intended and interpreted properly.

Any or all of these behaviors can be used to manipulate another or to gain power in a relationship. They serve as nurturing messages only when they communicate a genuine attitude that says "I honestly care" and carry the intention of maintaining or deepening the relationship. A closer look at three key aspects of this vocabulary demonstrates the subtleties and complexities of any currency.

DIRECT RELATIONAL STATEMENTS

Verbal statements of affection are not always easy to express. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Teyve asks his wife Golda, "Do you love me?" Her reply takes the form of a list of all the things she'd done for him over the years. She says: "For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years why talk about love right now?" Clearly for Golda feelings of love are not talked about directly. Yet Teyve really wants a direct statement of caring, and reluctantly Golda finally admits, "I suppose I do." Teyve, to be safe, replies, "And I suppose I love you too."

Each of us can recall wondering about another's affection for us and thinking "Does he really love me?" or "How much does she really care about me?" Many adults wonder how much their parents loved them because they never heard words such as "I love you" or "You're very special to me" while they were growing up. In some households direct statements of affection and caring occur with great frequency, and may even lose some potency through such regularity, whereas in other homes direct verbal affection does not occur or it occurs sparingly during special family occasions. In these families one seldom hears "I'm glad you are my daughter" or "I missed you" even though in many relationships such statements serve to clarify and strengthen the bond between individuals.

If you grew up in a family that was highly verbal about its affection, it may be hard to appreciate just how difficult it is for others to put affection into words. Some people think that it isn't necessary to talk about how you feel. Others will be able to tell by your actions. Many men have learned it is "masculine" to withhold feelings. In today's society, greeting card companies have made fortunes by writing the caring messages so all the customer has to do is select the right card. This process serves as a buffer for verbalizing deep feelings. Humorous cards often allow people to avoid sharing their feelings directly because the joke serves as a functional remembrance of the occasion. Sometimes, expressing verbal affection can best be done in writing. One man left love notes on his wife's mirror, even after nineteen years of marriage. A student bemoaned the fact that her parents lived near her college and so she never got letters; the only way her father expressed his feelings was by writing and he wrote such wonderful letters about how much he missed her when she was away at camp.

One wife said in the presence of her husband, "We've been married eleven years and in all that time, never once, not ONCE has he ever said to me, 'I love you!'" Asked if that was so, he replied, "Well, I take care of her, she's very special." When asked, "But have you ever said the words 'I love you' to her?" he said, "Not really, I guess." And even then he couldn't add, "but I do love you, Hon."

Most people have a deep need to talk about caring. Witness the letters to advice columnists grieving the death of a family member with "If only I had told him how much I loved him before he died."

Alternatively, some people can nurture others through direct, caring statements but cannot accept such statements comfortably. In a society that teaches many people to put themselves down, direct statements of caring can be unsettling and may be met with averted eyes, a flip remark or a disclaimer such as "Oh, you tell everyone that."

Direct statements of affection, spoken and written, are essential to all healthy relationships, especially within families whose primary function is to nurture.

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Carl Sandburg once wrote: "Life is like an onion: You uncover it a layer at a time and sometimes you weep." Relationships are also like onions. The surface, onion-skin stuff is there for all to see. But as layer after layer is peeled away, the deeper truths of any relationship can cause its members to laugh, cry, appreciate, discover, despair, grow and expand, or cling to the safe and known. People, like onions, grow from the inside out; that growing edge is at the core of one's being. And sharing the growing edge with another, inviting another "in," is a powerful way of saying "I care about you."

Closely related to direct verbal statements of caring, self-disclosure implies voluntarily telling others private/personal information that they are not likely to discover from another source. This personal/private information may involve your feelings for the other person or it may involve information about yourself. Either way the message is: "I trust you and am willing to share this information with you as a symbol of my caring for you and for our relationship."

True self-disclosure involves some degree of risk because the other person learns information which, if misused, could be hurtful to you. For example, the person could throw the information back at you in anger or reveal to others what you have shared. Still, despite the

risks, many individuals self-disclose to establish bonds between themselves and to deepen their relationships.

For this reason, although a verbal statement of caring for another is one type of self-disclosure, statements about yourself constitute the primary type of self-disclosure. How often have you heard, "I'm only telling this to you," or "Only a very few people know this about me." Such statements designate the listener as "special" and "trusted" and make the information privileged.

The decision to self-disclose is tied to personal history with another. For example, you may find yourself thinking, "I've reached a point in my relationship with Sarah where I can talk about my mother's illness or my fears of losing my job." Or you may think "John is a close enough friend to know about the breakup of my first marriage." What this really says is that the relationship is secure enough and mature enough to handle such information appropriately. Sarah or John, although they may be surprised or upset by the information, will not withdraw from the relationship based on the disclosure because the growth of the relationship allows such risks to be taken.

One of the most intriguing aspects of self-disclosure is how differently it is interpreted by various individuals. One person may consider a conversation to contain deep self-disclosure, yet the other may not. Allen may sit and talk for hours about his sexual exploits and think nothing of it while Rick would never be comfortable discussing his sexual life, except in a very special relationship. Jamie may share her poetry easily but struggles when it comes to talking about her inner feelings. Julie may be just the opposite. Self-disclosure is valued in certain cultures and not in others; women are socialized to value this vocabulary more than men in our society (Wood, 2005; Wood and Inman 1993).

Occasionally self-disclosure conjures up an image of telling another person all the bad stuff—the pain, the negative scary feelings, the dark side of self. This is partially true since that's where the risk may be perceived as the greatest. In most long-term relationships there are times when one or both members are too vulnerable to take such

risks. Experiences such as illness, job loss, or death of a loved one may render one partner unable to accept difficult self-disclosure from the other.

Self-disclosure is not only about planned revelation. It's also about responding to the moment. If you suddenly hear a piece of music that has emotional meaning for you—share that meaning. If you encounter a stranger who reminds you fondly of your former roommate—tell your college friend you miss her. Seize the moment to tear down walls rather than building them up through silence or distance. Healthy self-disclosure involves being alive to the current state of a relationship and being willing to take risks to foster future growth. All relationships have the potential for deepening, no matter how old, static, locked-in they are. Oftentimes all it takes is for one or the other to take the risk of saying "I need to talk" or "I need you to know something."

Finally, self-disclosure is not intended to be unidirectional. It doesn't work for one person in a relationship to take all the risks of sharing while the other listens. Self-disclosure develops through reciprocity. Over time both parties must share with each other or relational growth stagnates. The deepening of intimacy must be incremental and shared.

GIFTS

In some relationships how much you are loved reflects directly on the gifts you receive. A gift is "a visual symbol of love...something you can hold in your hand and say 'Look, he was thinking of me,' or 'Look, she remembered me'" (Chapman, 2004, p. 82–83). At this symbolic level, "Gifts become containers for the being of the donor" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 37). In some relationships gifts are the most commonly used vocabulary for conveying affection; in others, gifts play a minor role. Love letters, cards, or a kiss may substitute adequately for presents; what counts is the caring thought underlying the presentation of the gift.

The importance of shared or "recognized as different" attitudes toward gift giving cannot be overestimated. More holidays have been ruined, often annually, because one person or another felt

ignored or discounted by the lack of gifts or the type of gift received from a loved one.

Often gift-giving raises the issue of reciprocity. The tit-for-tat social rule is so strong the gift giving process becomes filled with scorekeeping. Reciprocity becomes extremely complicated, however, because the value of a gift may be judged at several different levels. Some people may judge a gift's significance based upon how much it costs; others care more about how personal the gift is, or how perfectly it suits them, because only someone who truly knew them and loved them could pick out such a perfectly tailored gift. On the other hand, the phrase "it's the thought that counts" became popular because some people measure the quality of a gift based upon the time and thought put into it. So, when you want to show someone how much you care with a gift, how do you select the right item? By price? Sentimentality? Time and effort?

Not an easy thing, this ritual of gifting another! Because it may appear "silly" or "unimportant" many people never express their real wishes around the subject of presents when, if the wishes were known, others would cheerfully change their behavior. Many individuals expect others to mind read-believing that "If you really loved me you would know I want." This creates a frustrating and futile trap for both parties, one easily resolved by openness and honesty about one's expectations and desires.

MEANINGS AND CURRENCIES

The meanings attached to a specific vocabulary of relational caring have direct impact on relationship development. Interaction may be viewed as an exchange process in which actors are invested in trading meanings. When meanings are shared, rewards are experienced; when meanings are missed, costs are experienced (Stephen 1984). Therefore, over a period of time, intimate partners will create common assumptions about the importance of parts of a relational vocabulary and develop high levels of symbolic interdependence.

Although messages of affection may be exchanged with the best intentions, accurate interpretation occurs only when both parties agree upon

the meaning of the act. Usually, the meanings you apply to another's messages are those you would use in a familiar situation. For example:

Each of us tends to identify as loving those expressions of love that are similar to our own. I may express my love...by touching you, being wonderfully careless with you, or simply contentedly sitting near you without speaking. You may express an equally deep love feeling by buying me a gift, cooking the veal, working longer hours to bring us more monetary freedom, or simply fixing the broken faucet. These are obviously different ways of loving. (Malone and Malone 1987, 74)

In the previous example, the question remains: Does the contented silent partner know that a veal dinner or a fixed faucet is a way of showing love? When you think about your relationships, you may find that you are apt to see others as more loving if they express their affection the same way you do. Such a similarity adds to a growing sense of symbolic interdependence.

What happens if family members want to share affection but seem unable to exchange the currencies desired by others? After interviewing married couples, Villard and Whipple concluded that spouses with similar affection exchange behaviors were more likely to report (a) high levels of perceived equity and (b) high levels of relationship satisfaction. Thus, they experienced greater relationship rewards. Nonetheless, accuracy in predicting (i.e. understanding) each other's choice of vocabulary did not raise relational satisfaction level. If spouses were accurate at predicting how their partners would respond to certain loving behaviors, they still reported low marital satisfaction if they were dissimilar in their own preferred affection behaviors. Unfortunately, as this study also found that wives were more likely to use more intimate communication than husbands, it suggests that many marriages may face "unhappiness, unfulfillment, conflict and/or divorce because of socialized differences between men and women in how they share 'who they are' and how they manifest 'affection'" (Millar, Rogers-Millar, & Villard, 1978, p. 15). Being able to share affections

provides definite advantages. Floyd (2002) found that high-affection communicators receive advantages in psychological, emotional, mental, social and relational characteristics compared to low-affection communicators. He reports, "They were more likely to have a secure attachment style and less likely to have a fearful/avoidant style. They received more affection from others." (p. 147). Additionally, high-affection communicators tended to have higher self-esteem than low affection communicators, which rendered them more likely to achieve greater levels of social and economic success.

Personal meaning placed on relational currencies changes over time. As relationships mature, members may change how they share affection because of new experiences, pressures, or expectations. For example, in a study of fathers and their adult sons, Floyd, Sargent and Di Corcia (2004) found that fathers change their loving behaviors with their sons as their sons mature; specifically, as their sons reach adulthood, fathers shift their communication of affection away from direct verbal statements or nonverbal gestures, preferring instead to engage in more supportive activities.

Economic conditions also affect the exchange of certain currencies. Financial stressors may result in fewer gifts exchanged among family members, but may also lead to greater sharing and favors. When a family member or friend loses a job, he may increase self-disclosure—sharing feelings and frustrations—which could deepen the intimacy of his significant relationships. Once re-employed, however, he may not have the time or inclination to continue this level of self-disclosure, and his relationships may revert to former patterns.

The process of exchanging affectionate messages significantly affects relational levels of intimacy. The greater similarity in individuals' exchange processes, the higher the levels of symbolic interdependence and satisfaction in the relationship. Thus, persons with an expanded vocabulary of loving messages have a greater chance of connecting with others in satisfying ways.

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QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Think about the ways you express affection. Which of the relational currencies discussed in the chapter are you comfortable using? Which currencies are difficult for you to accept from others? Give an example of how your repertoire

of relational currencies has changed in the last few years.

2. Describe a person who tries to reach out to others to be a friend, but who seems to have difficulty "speaking the same language" as those others. Indicate what you might suggest to that person in order to be more effective.
3. What relational currencies did you think about that the reading does not include? Describe two of them and indicate examples of how and by whom they are likely to be exchanged.
4. Describe the ways in which people use two of the following for exchanging caring messages—IM, Twitter, cell phones, texting. Give examples.

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