



Communication Skills for building Strong relationships

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1. Have a Regular Couples Meeting



Having a regular 30-minute meeting with your partner is a great way to keep connected and build a strong healthy relationship. A great suggestion is to break the meeting in to four parts:

1. Appreciation – express gratitude towards your partner for the positives
Values/Goals – share ideas about what is coming up for the week, what’s on the “to-do” list, how you will work together towards your shared values and goals.
2. Plan for Good Times – schedule date nights as well as individual and family activities – share how you are going to support one another to recharge and refresh.
3. Problems/Challenges – address conflicts, issues and challenges the relationship or life in general are facing.

The next set of points will walk you through a set of communication techniques that will help towards keeping your communications positive. The more you practice these, the more you will notice your typical escalating conflicts start to become more constructive communications where everyone feels heard and feels that the problems are being resolved! [Well that’s the plan in theory! Practice, practice!]

2. Set Communication “Ground Rules”



In your first weekly couples meeting, it's a good suggestion to set some communication "ground rules" for handling issues within your relationship. These can act as a set of guiding principles that you both agree to and are there to serve to protect your relationship – very important!

Here is an example set of ground rules – but you and your partner should discuss these and come up with your own unique set of rules.

1. When we are having trouble communicating, we will use the Speaker-Listener Technique (see Section 3).
2. When conflict is escalating, we will call a “time-out” or “pause” and either (1) try talking again using the Speaker-Listener Technique, or (2) agree to talk about the issue later, at a specified time, using the Speaker-Listener Technique. (see Section 7 for how to use the “time-out” strategy effectively).
3. We will completely separate Problem Discussion from Problem Solution.
4. We can bring up issues at any time, but the Listener can say, “this is not a good time”. If the Listener does not want to talk at that time, he or she can suggest a better time or take the responsibility for setting up a time to talk in the near future. You will need to decide upon how you will define “the near future”.

2. Set Communication “Ground Rules”

Continuation...



5. We will have weekly/fortnightly/monthly couple meetings. During these times we will note the positive changes we are making and discuss what we wish to focus on for future change. We will check in with each other to see if both our needs are being met in the relationship. Schedule a time now for your meeting - there is no time like the present!

6. We will make time for great things: fun, friendship, and sensuality. We will agree to protect these times from conflict and agree to deal with our issues at times separate to our positive relationship time.

After you have used your ground rules for a while, review and adjust as necessary - give your new "ground rules" for communicating a chance to work in your relationship before you decide to toss them out.

3. The Speaker- Listener Technique



If your attempts to talk to one another often get heated and out of hand, this technique is great to teach you both to slow your communications down so that they don't get out of hand. Use this technique to discuss emotionally sensitive issues, however, it might be a great idea to practice with easier topics or neutral issues first before discussing more difficult issues so that you can get the hand of the technique.

The beauty of this technique is all about slowing your interactions down so that both of you feel heard and understood.

3. The Speaker- Listener Technique

Continuation...



Rules for Both of You

1. ***The Speaker has the floor.*** Use a piece of cardboard/rug to stand on, so you would literally have the floor! Use a real object to designate the floor such as the TV remote or pen. (The floor has also been referred to as the “talking stick”). The point is that you have to use some specific object, because if you do not have the floor, you are the Listener.

2. ***Share the floor.*** You take turns being the speaker during the conversation. This is a trust issue: you trust you will have the floor when you need it, so you can pass it to your partner when your partner needs it.

3. **No problem solving.** Focus on having a good discussion, not finding solutions. You are less likely to hear what each other think about the problem when you are focused on solving the problem. Try not to problem solve prematurely.

Rules for the Speaker

1. ***Speak for yourself.*** Talk about your thoughts, feelings, and concerns, not your perceptions of the Listener’s point of view or motives. Try to use “I” statements, and talk about your point of view and feelings. “I was upset when you forgot our date”, is an “I” statement. “I don’t think you care about me” is a “you” statement and starts to sound like a criticism rather than an expression of emotional need.

3. The Speaker- Listener Technique

Continuation...



2. **Don't go on and on.** Pause to help the Listener understand you. It's very important that you keep what you say in manageable pieces. Try to tackle one issue at a time and not everything that has upset you in the past week, month or year.

3. **Stop and let the *Listener paraphrase*.** After saying a bit, stop and allow the Listener to paraphrase what you just said so you can check that they have heard you correctly. If the paraphrase was not quite accurate, you should politely and gently restate what you meant to say in a way that helps your partner understand. This is not a test! You want to make it possible for your partner to understand you.

Rules for the Listener

1. ***Listen!*** This rule sounds easy but the problem is we are often poor listeners because we are either trying to think of solutions or thinking of our own response to say. The key to remember is that you are trying to pay attention and understand what your partner's concern is and where there concern is coming from. If you can focus on that, then you won't be focusing on trying to fix it or defend yourself. So, no interrupting or disagreeing for the moment – your turn will come.

3. The Speaker- Listener Technique Continuation...



2. **Paraphrase what you hear.** When your partner has finished speaking, briefly repeat back what you heard to the Speaker, using your own words if you like, and make sure you understand what was said. This will show your partner that you are listening and is a check-point that you understood the message. Remember understanding IS NOT the same thing as agreeing with your partner. If you don't understand, ask the Speaker to clarify, but you need to limit yourself to just asking for explanations. Do not mind read.

3. **Don't rebut.** Focus on the Speaker's message. As the Listener, you may not offer your opinion or thought. This is the hardest part of being a good Listener. If you are upset by what your partner says, you need to edit out any responses you may want to make and *pay attention* to what your partner is saying. Wait until you get the floor to make your response. You will have your chance, and when you do, you'll want your partner to extend the same courtesy to you. Any words or gestures to show your opinion are not allowed, including making faces! Avoid giving advice or trying to fix the problem.

4. Assertive Communication



When levelling with your partner about your problems and concerns, communicating in an **assertive** manner is going to have the best outcome for both you and your partner.

Assertiveness is most easily learnt by using a simple script. It will help you give structure to what you want to say and keep you focused. A script also has the advantage of permitting you to develop a statement in advance, practicing it by yourself or with someone you trust, and finally delivering it with greater confidence when you need to.

There are three basic components to an assertiveness statement:

1. *"I feel"*. The purpose is to give a brief description of any emotion triggered in you by the situation. It is an "I" statement, about you and your feelings.

- "I feel hurt"
- "I feel upset"
- "I feel angry"

2. *Describe the problem*. This part focuses on the facts and your understanding of what's going on. Do not include judgments or assumptions about the other person's motives; rather, give a clear description of events and experiences that you need to talk about. Avoid using "you" statements in your descriptions.

4. Assertive Communication Continuation...



- “we haven’t spent much time together lately”
- “the housework isn’t being shared fairly”
- “that we haven’t had time for intimacy lately”

Using “I” statements to describe the situation helps to avoid making accusations and blaming statements, which tend to make others feel defensive and less willing to listen or compromise. Blaming statements start with “you” and are called “you” statements.

- “you don’t care about us”
- “you’re hurting me”
- “you’re always late”
- “you don’t help me”

Be careful not to dress “you” statements up to look like “I” statements. This charade is usually obvious because the sentence starts, “I feel that you...”

- “I feel that you are selfish”
- “I feel that you are never home”
- “I feel that you manipulate me”

You might feel that there are truths to these statements, but using such language to convey your disappointments and hurts comes across as an aggressive attack and this is rarely helpful and will only lead to your partner having a natural response to argue back and defend themselves.

4. Assertive Communication Continuation...



You might feel that there are truths to these statements, but using such language to convey your disappointments and hurts comes across as an aggressive attack and this is rarely helpful and will only lead to your partner having a natural response to argue back and defend themselves.

3. *“I would prefer it if...”*. This is the part where you can assert your own needs and make polite requests for change. It provides the significant other with information about what changes you would like to happen.

Here are some guidelines to follow:

- *Ask for behavioral, not attitude change.* You can't reasonably expect someone to change what they believe or feel just because you don't like it. Beliefs and feelings aren't usually in voluntary control. But you can ask someone to change how they act and what they do.
- *Ask for one change at a time.* Don't give a laundry list. That overwhelms people and makes them feel pressured.
- *Ask for something that can be changed now.* “The next time we go on vacation, I would prefer it if...” This is a poor statement because it will be long forgotten.
- *Be specific and concrete.* Vague request such as “be nicer” or “help more” don't provide a clear picture of what you would like to see happen. Give specific statements of what it is you are requesting. E.g., “I would prefer it if you did not yell at me” or “I would prefer it if you could help with the dishes while I bath the kids”.

4. Assertive Communication

Continuation...



So putting it all together, we get:

I feel _____ [feeling]
When _____ [describe the problem situation
without using you]
I would like it if _____ [make request for change]

Exercise: Developing Your Own Assertiveness:

To develop your assertiveness skills, practice being assertive around positive feelings

1) HAPPINESS

I feel HAPPY

When

I would like it if

2) GRATITUDE

I feel GRATEFUL

When

I would like it if

4. Assertive Communication Continuation...



Homework

Practice leveling your positive feelings daily. Set aside 5 to 10 minutes a day to tell your partner about the positive things you are seeing your partner do that makes you happy. Whilst this may seem silly, it is the necessary groundwork for developing the skills to communicate about the negatives.

Tick each box on the days that you completed the task:

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun

Once you're feeling confident being assertive around positive emotions, you can move on to more trickier or emotionally "hot" topics. Don't forget to use these skills in combination with the Listener-Speaker Technique and Problem Solving skills.



5. Roadblocks to Good Communication



There are a number of “do’s” and “don’ts” when it comes to communicating. We’ve compiled a list for you to reflect on your own communication styles. Remember you are working to change your communication style – not your partners! So as you read the list ask yourself “do I do that?” and if you identify some “don’ts” as part of your communication style, you can work on by looking at the alternative “Do”.

DON'TS	DO'S
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long lectures or “sermons”• Blaming (e.g., “you need to stop ____” “It’s your fault” etc)• Vague statements (e.g., “Shape up,” “Knock it off,” “I don’t like that” etc)• Asking negative questions (e.g., “Why do you always do that?” “How many times must I tell you?”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use brief statements of 10 words or less• Use I statements (e.g., “I feel ____ when ____” or take responsibility for your own actions• Use direct and specific statements (e.g., “Please don’t threaten me”)• Use direct and specific statements (e.g., “Plases don’t call me names”)



5. Roadblocks to Good Communication Continuation...



DON'TS	DO'S
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor listening with looking away, silent treatment, crossing arms, and so forth• Interrupting others• Not checking to see if you really understand others• Put-downs (e.g., "You're worthless," "I'm sick of you," etc), threats, and so forth• Yelling, screaming and so forth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actively listen with good eye contact, leaning forward, nodding, and so forth• Let each person completely state his/her thoughts before stating yours• Give feedback/paraphrase (e.g., restate what another said to you)• Be constructive (e.g., "I'm concerned about your grades," "Something is bothering me; can we discuss it?" etc)• Use a neutral/ natural tone of voice

5. Roadblocks to Good Communication Continuation...



DON'TS	DO'S
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sarcasm• Bringing up old issues, past behavior• Put-downs (e.g., “You’re worthless,” “I’m sick of you,” etc), threats, and so forth• Not matching verbal and non verbal communications (e.g., saying “I love you”, while pounding one’s fist angrily on the table.• Keeping feelings inside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Say what you mean be specific and straightforward• Let each person completely state his/her thoughts before stating yours• Stay on one topic• Match verbal and non verbal communication (saying “I love you” while smiling.• Express feelings to others appropriately



5. Roadblocks to Good Communication Continuation...



DON'TS	DO'S
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scowling, directing antagonistic facial expression toward others• “Mind reading” or assuming you know what other people think	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use appropriate facial expression toward others.• Really listen to others’ point of view; ask questions to make sure you understand.

6. A few more pointers:



Here's a few more pointers to keep in mind when talking with your partner and working on your relationship problems:

1. Think Straight, Don't Overreact:

- Stay calm
- Use a coping statement
- Check your self-talk for unhelpful thinking and beliefs

2. Communicate effectively:

Be assertive, listen, take turns to speak, validate your partner

3. Maybe, make a request:

- Clear, observable and positive

4. Maybe, start problem-solving

- Look for a win-win solution that meets both partners needs

5. If necessary, stop arguing:

- Stop discussion, take time to cool down, and start again afresh

If you're finding your arguments are escalating, then the next tip may just be what you need.



7. Time-Out Strategy for Escalating Conflict



Using a "time-out", just as a sports coach would by signalling a "T" with their hands and taking time out of the game to re-think and re-structure a game plan - can be an effective communication strategy to manage couple's escalating communications.

The 6 steps to taking a "time-out"

1. Recognise that you are experiencing an internal build-up of intense emotion (i.e., anger). Pay attention to the physical indicators your body is sending you.
2. Say to the person you are in conflict with "I am beginning to feel....." and "I need to take some time-out. I'll be back to talk about this when I have calmed down". If you find your level of anger is beyond being able to communicate this message effectively, simply signal time-out with your hands by making a "T".
3. Walk away from the situation completely.
4. Do something you know helps you to feel calm (go for a walk, call a friend, draw, garden, read, breath, etc.).
5. Stay away until you are calm. You might like to think about how you are going to "respond" to your partner, rather than "react" to your partner. What is it that you are feeling and thinking about the issue at hand?

7. Time-Out Strategy for Escalating Conflict Continuation...



6. Return to your partner and come up with ideas about what you want or need and how things can be different. If still emotional, nominate when you will talk again.

You will need to discuss the "time-out" strategy with your partner before it is used. The purpose of a "time-out" is to help you to calm down (not avoid discussing difficult issues) and to sort out a response (as opposed to a reaction) that will best get your message across.

Always come back to your partner - this will make it easier for your partner to give you the space you need the next time you call a 'time out'.

It is important that the person who is left behind respects the person's need for time-out by NOT following their partner. Be assured your partner is making a positive choice to control escalating anger and is protecting the relationship by doing so. It may even be of benefit for you to take time-out and re-think your thoughts, feelings, and reactions before attempting to communicate again.

If after trying these communication strategies at home you are still experiencing relationship problems, it can be helpful to talk with a relationship counsellor.

We can have all the communication skills in the world, however, if we can't make sense of why we feel the way we do, or things are just not improving, then an experienced relationship counsellor will be able to assist you and your partner.



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