

# Communicating as a Couple

1st February 2020

Good communication is essential to a strong relationship. It helps couples share their joys and sorrows, understand each other's thoughts and feelings, and solve problems together. And it's a critical skill for couples dealing with the unique challenges of life.

There are two main keys to communicating well as a couple: careful listening and paying close attention both to what you say and how you say it. Good communication means sending clear and consistent messages, not just with your words but with your tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Just as important, it also means taking the time to truly listen to what the other person is saying.

## Tips on communicating as a couple

Learning to communicate well is one of the most important things any couple can do. Poor communication is a common complaint of couples who split up, and it can make life much more difficult for those who stay together. You might try these ways of strengthening your communication skills:

Make time to talk to each other. Try to spend some time each day talking to each other—over a meal, after work, or before bed. This is so important that some busy couples find it helpful to mark time to talk in their calendars. One study found that just talking for as little as 15 minutes a day can help keep a relationship strong. (In contrast, couples who split up spend an average of four minutes a day or less in conversation.) When you're apart, talk by phone if you can—if you can't, stay connected by email and text messages. If possible, have occasional face-to-face talks using FaceTime on a mobile phone or tablet or video chat software, such as Skype, from your computer.

Share your thoughts and feelings. One of the joys of being part of a couple is having someone with whom you can share your deepest thoughts and feelings. But after a while, you may fall into a rut. You may seem to talk only about things such as what to have for dinner or watch on TV. If this happens, make an extra effort to talk about the things that matter most to you—the joys and sorrows you can't share (or can't share as well) with anyone else. If you're still having trouble, try taking normal conversations a step further. Talk about what you think about a story in the news, a good book you're reading, or how your supervisor makes you feel.

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Listen carefully. Good communication involves not just speaking clearly, but listening closely. This kind of "active listening" means giving each other your full attention and not interrupting. When you're talking about something important, turn off your television, radio and mobile phone. Pay attention to your thoughts while someone else is speaking. If you find yourself planning your response while your partner is still talking, you're probably not listening and need to refocus on what's being said.

Show that you understand what you've heard. It's important not just to listen, but to make it clear that you've heard what the other person is telling you. You can do this by first reflecting back what you've heard through phrases such as, "So what you're saying is . . . ." Or "I want to make sure I understand you correctly. You feel that . . . ." This way your spouse or partner will know that you are truly listening to the conversation. Don't give advice or try to solve problems unless you are asked.

Offer frequent praise, support and encouragement. Studies have shown that couples who stay together make many more positive comments to each other than negative ones. You might try to find something to praise every day, even if you've said similar things before. Your praise can be as simple as, "That was a fantastic dinner! I really appreciate all the effort you put into it," or "You were so patient when you helped Maria with her homework. I could see what a difference it made to her." If you offer support regularly, your words are less likely to meet with resistance when you have to bring up a tough subject.

Write notes or send email or text messages. Leave a note on the car seat that says, "I love you," or "Good luck with your presentation! I know you'll do a great job." Send emails, text messages, or "I miss you" cards when your spouse or partner is away for an extended period of time.

Pay attention to your body language. Only a small part of communication involves your words; the rest comes from your gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. You can send positive messages by doing such things as looking the other person in the eye, giving hugs and kisses, and gently stroking the other person's arm or hair. You'll send negative messages if you engage in eye-rolling, finger-pointing, or walking away when your spouse is speaking to you.

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## Talking about difficult subjects

At some point, every couple will need to talk about a difficult or painful subject. These tips can make the conversation easier.

Have the conversation at a stress-free time. Avoid bringing up a sensitive issue when either of you is tired, hungry, or pressed for time. You'll also want to avoid talking about some issues when children might overhear you.

Keep your sense of humour. Studies show that couples with strong relationships use a lot of humour, which can ease tension and help couples connect through stress and pressure.

Bring up one difficult subject at a time. Raising a lot of sensitive issues in the same conversation can leave the other person feeling confused and defensive, especially if you haven't mentioned them before. Figure out what concerns you most and talk about that first. Stay on topic and save other important matters for a later talk.

Make "I" statements. Be specific about how you feel instead of making sweeping generalizations. Avoid beginning sentences with phrases that put people on the defensive, such as "You never . . ." or "You always . . ." or "You're so . . ." Instead, focus on expressing your own feelings with more neutral comments, such as "I feel . . ." or "I'm concerned that . . ." or "I'm worried that . . ."

Talk about the issue, not who's "right" or "wrong." Focus on finding a solution instead of assigning blame. If you're unhappy that the living room always looks messy, you might say, "I don't feel free to invite friends over after work when our home is untidy. Let's come up with another system for sharing the chores."

Acknowledge the other person's point of view. Acknowledging another point of view shows that you're listening even if you don't agree. Sometimes you can do this just by nodding or making a comment such as, "I agree" or "I understand." Or you might say, "I can hear how frustrated you feel" or "I know it's hard for you to consider making a big change in how we do things."

Take a break if needed. Take a 15-minute break if your conversation becomes so

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overheated that either or both of you are on the verge of saying things you'll regret. Let your partner know you need a break. You might go for a walk or just agree to spend a few minutes apart before you tackle the subject again.

Look into counselling if you can't resolve your disagreements. If your discussions seem to make things worse instead of better, consider talking to a therapist or couples counsellor who can help you with communication skills. Some couples need only a few sessions to begin seeing improvements in how they relate to each other. Remember, good communication takes skill and practice.

## Helpful things to say when you're having trouble communicating

Sometimes making a few small changes in what you say can make a big difference in how well you communicate as a couple. Here are some ideas using "I" statements:

Instead of saying:

"You never call when you're going to come home late."

Try:

"I'd like you to call when you won't be home so that I can adjust my plans."

Instead of saying:

"How many times do I have to ask you to fix that broken step?"

Try:

"I'm very concerned that someone will trip on the step and get hurt. When do you think you'll be able to get to this?"

Instead of saying:

"Why did you buy a flat-screen TV without telling me first?"

Try:

"When you buy expensive things without consulting me, I feel that my opinion doesn't matter to you."

Instead of saying:

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"You're not making any sense."

Try:

"I don't understand what you mean. Are you saying that . . . ?"

Instead of saying:

"Don't expect me to clean the house."

Try:

"I have a very busy week, so if you want to have your friends over to watch the game on Saturday, you'll need to clean the house. Would you like me to give you a list of what needs to be done?"

Good communication takes skill and practice. But the payoff is worth it. One study found that couples who communicate well—no matter how long they've been together—are more satisfied with their relationship and have greater sexual satisfaction.

## When your spouse won't open up

You may want to take some additional steps if your spouse frequently refuses to communicate or seems to tune you out when you try to communicate.

Avoid making assumptions. At times you may think your spouse doesn't want to talk because she's angry or upset with you. But she may be angry or upset about an incident at work or something else altogether. You may be able to ease the situation by making a comment such as, "I noticed that you've been quiet over the past couple of days. I've wondered if something is bothering you."

Consider your partner's family background. In some families, serious conversations turn into major arguments quickly. If your spouse comes from a family where this was the case, she may worry that you'll become angry or even walk out if she speaks honestly – especially if one of her parents often acted in this way. You can help by setting a good example. Stay calm and reassure her that you love her even when you disagree. If a discussion turns into an argument, give her an extra hug or show your affection in another way afterward. Or your spouse may come from a family in which people show their feelings through actions,

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such as giving gifts, instead of words. If so, you may need to explain that although you appreciate all the things she does for you, words are important to you, too.

Remember that some people find it hard to open up because they are afraid of rejection. Think about a time at work or during a meeting when it was difficult for you to bring up a new idea or to say what you thought. Even if you liked and respected your supervisor and colleagues a lot, you may have wondered what they would think if you expressed your views honestly. Your spouse may sometimes have a similar reaction when you try to get him to open up. You can help by making an effort to really listen and not make judgments about what he says. Make a habit of always showing respect for what he says even if you disagree.

If your spouse still won't open up and this is affecting your relationship, you may want to look into couples counselling. A counsellor may be able to show you new ways of communicating that will make it easier for both of you to express your feelings honestly.

Establishing good communication can take a lot of patience and hard work. Try not to get upset if you or your spouse slips back into old habits. The important thing is making a commitment to changing the way you communicate and working toward that goal.

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