

# 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 all couples.

There are two main keys to communicating well as a couple: careful listening and making time to talk with one another, no matter how busy you are.

## Tips on communicating as a couple

Learning to communicate well is one of the most important things a 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.

Make time to talk with each other. Try to spend time each day talking with each other—over a meal, after work, or before bed. Some busy couples mark time to talk in their calendars. One study found that talking for as little as 15 minutes a day can help keep a relationship strong. (Couples who split up spend an average of four minutes a day or less in conversation.) When you're apart, stay connected by phone, texts, and other technology.

Share your thoughts and feelings. After you've been together a while, you and your partner may fall into a communications rut. You may seem to talk only about things like what to have for dinner or what show to watch. If this happens, make an extra effort to talk about the things that matter most to you—the things you can't share as well with anyone else. Or 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 manager makes you feel.

Listen carefully. Give each other your full attention, and don't interrupt. When you're talking about something important, turn off distractions and interruptions like your phone, TV, or email alerts.

Show that you understand what you've heard. Make it clear that you've heard what your partner said. You can do this by 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. You feel that...." This shows your partner that you are truly listening. Don't give advice or try to solve problems

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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! Thanks so much for making it," or "You were so patient with the kids tonight." Compliments and acknowledgement of your partner's positive qualities goes a long way. Think of it as building "love capital." If you offer support regularly, your words are less likely to meet with resistance when you do have to talk about tough subjects.

Send each other supportive and loving messages and notes. "I love you." "I miss you." "Good luck with your presentation today!"

*Technology can help couples manage their conflict better, communicate better, and feel closer to one another. [Psychology Today](#)*

Watch your body language. A big part of communication comes from your gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. You can send positive messages by doing such things as looking your partner in the eye, giving hugs, kisses, and strokes. You'll send negative messages if you engage in eye-rolling, finger-pointing, or walking away when your partner is speaking.

## Talking about difficult subjects

At some point, every couple needs 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.

Try to keep your sense of humour. Studies show that couples with strong relationships use a lot of humour. Studies show that humour helps us de-stress. Do things that will make both of you smile when tensions arise.

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Stick to 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. 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 phrases that tend to 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 people home after work when our place is a mess. Let's find a way to share chores."

Acknowledge the other person's view. This shows that you're listening even if you don't agree. Sometimes you can do this by nodding or making a comment such as, "I agree," "I understand," or "I can hear how frustrated you feel."

Don't interrupt. It's not OK to interrupt co-workers, friends, or your partner. It's also not an effective communication strategy for getting what you want or for reaching a closer understanding with someone.

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

Ask your partner for help. Make requests in a way that won't put your partner on the defensive. You might say, "It would mean a lot to me if you could..."

Make time for intimacy of all kinds, including touch. It could be as simple as holding hands or giving a hug.

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

A few small changes in what you say can make a big difference in how well you communicate as a couple. Making a request is usually helpful if the tone is not blaming. 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 schedule."

Instead of saying:

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

Try:

"I'm worried 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:

"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:

"When is a good time for us to talk about cleaning this week?"

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.

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## When you are having a communication breakdown

You may want to take some additional steps if you are having a communication breakdown.

Avoid making assumptions. There may be times when you think your partner doesn't want to talk because he or she is angry or upset with you. But something may have happened at work or elsewhere, and it may not be about you at all. You might ease the situation by making a comment such as, "I've noticed that you've been quiet. Is something bothering you."

Consider your partner's family background. In some families, serious talks turn into major arguments quickly. If this was true in your partner's family, he may worry that you'll get angry or even walk out if he speaks honestly. You can help by setting a good example. Stay calm and loving even when you disagree.

Remember that some people find it harder than others to open up or talk about feelings. If this is the case for you or your partner, listening and not making judgments can be very helpful. Always show respect for one another, and especially when you disagree.

Consider counselling if you are unable to resolve your differences. If your discussions seem to make things worse instead of better, consider talking with a therapist or couples counsellor. Some couples need only a few sessions to begin seeing improvements in how they communicate with one another.

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