

Relationship Communication

Guiding principles Keep these in mind to help cooler heads prevail when you are making an important decision, trying to resolve a problem, or just in everyday interactions.

Stress in life erodes our ability to be at our best if there is something particularly stressful going on in your lives, remember to consider this when you bring up an important topic between you or when things seem to go badly and you can't figure out why. Having compassion for yourself and for your partner will help you realize what went wrong and even to stop a discussion from turning into a nasty argument.

You won't always agree and you don't need to, respect for the others' feelings is more important than getting the other person to agree with you. You don't even really have to understand the other person's point of view! When you can each simply accept and respect the others' view or feelings about an issue, the two of you can work together to find a way to solve the problem.

Focus on problem solving, not on rehashing your complaints over and over. I've seen so many couples do this, and never transition to actually working on the problem because they are so busy trying to get the other person to see their point of view. One problem with this is that one or both never get to where they feel "heard" by the other. A second problem that contributes to this is that one or both are too invested in getting the other person to agree with them.

Remember that the two of you are in this together, to make the relationship work and to get past whatever decision or problem is in front of you at the moment. The idea is to work towards a winwin solution (sorry about the cliché!), rather than trying to get your way at the expense of the other. Not all problems will result in a magical solution that leaves both of you happy, that wouldn't be realistic. But over time, when it feels fair between you and that you tend to decide together on what is best for both and the relationship, you will preserve the love and care you have together.

Basic skills here come the basics you've probably already heard but no resource on communication skills is complete without them!

"I" statements communicating in "I" statements means that when you bring up a problem between you, when you express how you are feeling, when you ask for what you need, you are "owning" it and not blaming the other person. The structure of an "I" statement is to say "I feel ____ when ____ happens" or "I feel ____ when you ____." It may seem like just moving the words around. It isn't as long as you do this knowing that the intention behind the statement needs to match the words that you really ARE owning your own feelings in the situation and expressing what is happening to you, and not blaming the other person for "making" you feel a certain way. No one can "make" another person feel a certain way your feelings about a situation come directly from what you think about that situation. The importance here is that an "I" statement is just that, a statement, and NOT an accusation and is far less likely to lead to defensiveness in your partner.

Active listening If you are actively listening to someone, you are purposefully trying to understand all you can about what the person is trying to communicate to you. Sounds easy, right? Actually, it takes some practice. There are a few important components to this, and each one helps you to understand the best you can and also will help the other person feel "heard." First, make eye contact. Second, be quiet and stop planning what you are going to say next. Third, if you are not sure you understand, say so and ask questions to clarify. And fourth, to make sure you understand you can try saying it back to the person by reflecting or rephrasing. Finally, acknowledge the statement and say that you understand.

Work towards saying exactly what you mean, no shortcuts because the other "knows what you mean." This is so easy to do but sometimes when you get careless about how you say something, it can be misinterpreted. Take care to be clear.

Keep it respectful - this means no name-calling or insults, avoiding sarcasm and passive aggressive statements or actions, and expressing yourself with care, concern, and compassion.

Develop your own unique rules - I've worked with many couples who found it helpful to expand the basics above to include some rules of their own. You may not need all of these but consider whether some of these may help you, or develop others of your own together.

Code word - sometimes a couple finds it helpful to have a code word or phrase between them that can serve as a light-

hearted verbal cue that one is sensing a problem or unhealthy pattern developing. This lets you both take a breath and work together to figure out what has gone wrong between you and “start again” in a more healthy way. If you feel like a visual cue might work better, use that. It seems to work best if the cue is something you both consider humorous - this has a tendency to defuse negative feelings.

Time out - No, time outs are not just for toddlers. Sometimes adults need one, too. If a situation gets too heated and you feel like you need a few minutes to get yourself under control, it may help to call a time out. There are two important pieces to doing this though. First, the person calling the time out needs to set a timeframe for when the discussion will continue. This can be 10 minutes, a half hour, a day, whatever feels appropriate. Second, the person calling the time out needs to take the lead on re-establishing the discussion. In other words, don't use this to avoid facing the situation.

No bringing up the past - Sometimes it becomes a problem in a couple where one or both partners have a tendency to pile on all the hurts that have ever been in your relationship, no matter how long ago or whether the issue was settled or not. On the other hand, there are times when a past issue is relevant but the person bringing it up is accused of “bringing up the past.” For instance, if one partner has a drinking problem, it is appropriate to bring up how long this has been happening because it is a part of the problem today and is relevant. If a past issue has nothing to do with what you are discussing at the moment, leave it out.

No interrupting - If one or both of you have a tendency to interrupt the other, you may need to make this a rule between you. Also, please see “active listening” above! If you need to, set up a way to use a “talking stick” if you have to. It doesn't matter what the object is, but the person holding it is the one talking and the other person is in active listening mode until the object is passed.

No monopolizing - This would be the opposite problem of interrupting, if one or both of you have a tendency to monopolize the conversation, you may need to set a time limit for talking time, and even use a timer if you need to.

Other references and important areas to consider:

Conflict resolution - You can expand what you have learned here to understand more in-depth tools to help you resolve conflicts. See our resource on [conflict resolution](#) for more information.

Boundaries - Boundaries are an important part of respectful communication and care between two people. Being able to set appropriate boundaries and also respect another's boundaries are both important skills to have. See our resource on [boundaries](#) for more information.

Thought distortions - Thought distortions or cognitive distortions are incorrect thinking patterns that can lead us to more likely experience uncomfortable emotions such as anger, depression, or anxiety. See our resource on [thought distortions](#) for more information.

Changing negative thinking - This resource goes along with that on thought distortions and can help you find ways to turn your thinking around to see people and situations in a more realistic and healthy way. See our resource on [changing negative thinking](#) for more information.