



EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Can We Talk? Improving Couples' Communication¹

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Overview



Committed couples care about the quality of their relationship. They realize communication is important in improving their relationship. Couples

who have healthy marriages love and respect each other and communicate that to each other.

Communication is the Key



Communication is the key to a strong, healthy relationship.

Communication allows partners to feel love and caring. Effective communication requires practice of the skills of listening and expressing thoughts and feelings.

Communication is much more

than talking. It is what you say, how you say it, why you say it, when you say it and even what you don't say.

Listening

Listening is the single most important communication skill. A good listener does more than hear words. How do you get to be a good listener? To really listen is to pay attention to your partner's words *and* feelings. Good listening sends a clear message to your partner: you are important to me.



Good listening shows you care about his or her thoughts and feelings. Listening without being defensive encourages open and honest sharing. Good listening is the key to preventing problems and to help solve them when they happen.

Listening requires that you pay attention to the voice, expression, eye contact, and gestures of your partner. It is important to focus on feelings as well as the words.

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When you listen to your partner you encourage him (or her) to talk about what is important to him (or her). It's easy to be careless or sloppy about really listening. You may think you know what the other person means. You may pretend to listen while you do something else. To break the habit of not listening carefully, you must forget about what you are going to say. Avoid judging and making comparisons.

It may be difficult to change poor listening habits, but it can be done. Improving communication is worth the effort. Listening to your partner is probably the best way to show care and concern.

The Parts of Listening



Listening requires attentiveness. Paying attention and avoiding distractions shows the person

speaking that you intend to listen. It also means setting aside your own thoughts and opinions until you have heard what the speaker is trying to say.

Listening requires an attitude of openness and respect for what your partner is saying. You may not agree, but show that you are willing to hear what the other person says. That demonstrates your respect for the person speaking.

Listening requires hearing and sensing feelings. Check your understanding of the message you are getting by putting the message in your own words: "Do you mean. . .?" "Are you saying. . .?" This helps you know whether you've understood what your partner really means.

Listening requires a response, not necessarily an answer. Let the other person know you are ready for more listening. "Tell me more about that."

Communication is difficult when strong emotions are present. Being with your partner who is going through a tough time shows you care. A touch or

hug can show support when you don't know what to say.

Habits We Have That Prevent Good Listening

As listeners:

The habits we have and the things we do can prevent good listening. Too often, as listeners we concentrate on the response we will give--instead of concentrating on the message we are getting. Our habit of thinking of a response or jumping to conclusions turns off our ability to hear the intended message.



Judging what is being said is another roadblock to good listening. A quick response of anger or making fun of what is being said can block out hearing the real message.

As speakers:

The speaker who uses negative words, phrases, and body language often sets up misinterpretations *and* discourages good listening.

The speaker who uses positive (or neutral) words, phrases, and body language encourages open and attentive listening

Habits We Can Learn to Encourage Good Listening

Clear Self-Expression

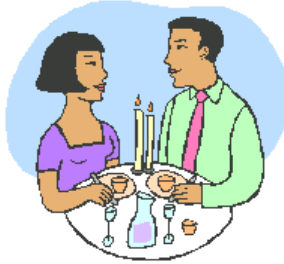
You may think that your partner knows your needs, feelings, and opinions without your saying them aloud. All too often, that's not the way it is. The habit of expecting your partner to read your mind can result in hurt, disappointment, and misunderstandings. Do you want to avoid this common communication mistake? It's simple: *State your thoughts as clearly, honestly, and positively as you can.*

Don't avoid talking about something important to you because you are afraid of what your partner will think. Focus on how something is affecting you. And don't blame or criticize your

partner while you're doing it. *Don't say "Unlike you, I..." --unless you're looking for a fight.*

Using "I" Messages

An effective way to talk to your partner is through "I" messages. These describe your feelings and tell how you are affected by your partner's behavior. "I" messages can express emotions in a way that is not threatening. "I" messages focus on the speaker's feelings.



"I" messages are different from a "you" message. "You" messages blame and judge the other person. "You" messages often trigger defensiveness or hostility in the partner and tend to increase conflict. *Think about how you feel when you hear "You always..."*

The Mechanics of "I" Messages

"I" messages let your partner know how you feel inside--and why you feel that way. "I" messages have three parts:

- a statement about the speaker's feelings
- a statement about what the other person did or said
- the reason for the speaker's feelings.

Practice using "I" statements. Here's one: *"I get upset when you criticize my parents because my parents are so important to me."*

This "I" statement follows the three steps we mentioned:

1. It describes the feeling: (*"I get upset"*)
2. It describes the behavior: (*when you criticize my parents*)

3. It identifies the reason: (*because my parents are so important to me.*)

Different Communication Styles

As stated earlier, communication plays a very important role in partners being satisfied in their marriage. If you'd like better communication with your partner, it's good to understand some of the differences in communication styles.

Expressive. One partner may be more expressive than the other. Expressive people like to share emotions and feelings. They look for real-time feedback or responses.

Task- or Fact-Oriented. Another partner might seldom talk about feelings--may use the word, but use a fact; as in: *"I feel that I'm not making enough money."* This communicator is looking for acceptance of his/her point of view, not emotions.

These opposite styles might attract each other initially, and--over time--have difficulties dealing with what's going on in the relationship as the relationship becomes more complicated.

It is important to try to understand each others communication style and support each others efforts to improve communication and



connectiveness. *There are no secrets.* It just requires practice, practice, practice.

Communicating details about our internal lives is a basic part of an intimate relationship. Speaking and listening at this level is a way to feel

connected.

Learning and Practicing New Habits

Effective communication isn't easy. Teaching yourself and learning new communication skills takes patience, patience, patience as well as practice, practice, practice.

Taking the time to talk is important. Your relationship provides a safe place to share feelings, thoughts, fears, dreams and hopes. Make a special effort to find time to talk to your partner alone.

In tough times people feel overwhelmed with worries and responsibilities. Time together as a couple is left out. Even when you are busy and worried, plan time together without interruption.

A few minutes spent just talking about your day can be a relief from stress. Be sure to save difficult or problem-solving discussions for times when you and your partner are not tired or distracted.

You may need to be the one who starts conversations. You will find many ways to open the door for communication if you are sensitive to your partner. Taking the time to listen keeps the lines of communication open.

Finding Time to Talk

- Spend time together talking with undivided attention.
- Make a "date" to talk to your partner.
- Plan one routine family time each week.
- Notice those times when your partner seems to want to talk.
- Talk instead of watching TV.
- Talk when you take a walk together.
- Talk while you work together on household chores.
- Talk in the car while traveling to activities.

Summing it Up

In good times and bad, couples need each other. Good communication does not mean that your family won't have any problems or that your partner will like what you have to say. Good communication means the chances of solving problems are much higher if you and your partner can communicate freely and well with each other.

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