

9 Important Communication Skills for Every Relationship¹

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Effective communication is critical to successful relationships. Researchers and therapists have found at least nine skills that can help couples learn to talk effectively about important issues (Gottman 1994; Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg 2010; Schramm and Harris 2011). How we interact about issues such as time spent together/apart, money, health, gender differences, children, family, friends, commitment, trust, and intimacy affects our ability to develop and maintain lasting marital friendships. If learned well, these nine skills can help put our relationships on a positive trajectory for success. (Note: The word “marriage” is interchangeable with “relationship,” if you are not married.)



Figure 1. *Communication*

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Helpful Information

What do couples talk about?

Time Together/Apart. Both the quantity and quality of time we spend together influence the well-being of our marital friendships. Spending time apart participating in other activities also influences the well-being of our relationships.

Money. How we think and talk about money, our spending habits, and our ability to budget, invest, and plan for the future impact couple financial management processes and practices.

Health. Couples must talk about many health-related issues, including nutrition, exercise, illness, disease, accidents, health care, mortality, and death.

Men/Women. Because men tend to be more task-oriented in their communication styles and women tend to be more process-oriented, men tend to want to solve issues immediately, while women tend to want to talk about them more and come to a consensus about what should be done.

Children. How children develop physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually are often topics of discussion. Focusing on the best ways to consistently meet children’s needs is considered being child-centered.

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Family/In-Laws/Friends. Couples often talk about situations and circumstances surrounding the interactions they have with their closest relationships.

What do couples communicate when they are communicating?

Commitment. How we “hang in there” and contribute to our marital friendship, even when things aren’t going particularly well, is a sign of how committed we are to our relationship. Loyalty and fidelity are aspects of commitment and trust.

Trust. Trusting relationships are relationships in which both partners are dependable, available to support each other, and responsive to each other’s needs. An ability to negotiate conflict and a positive outlook about the future of the relationship are also components of trust.

Intimacy. The social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical connections we make with each other determine the levels of intimacy we experience in our relationships.

What do couples argue about?

Because the items listed above are some of the major topics couples talk about, it follows that they are also the same topics that can spur disagreements. For instance, it is a familiar joke that people can have difficulties in their relationships with in-laws. Take for example, “What is the difference between in-laws and outlaws? Answer: One is ‘Wanted!’” Sayings such as these underscore the importance of knowing how your relationships with others can affect your marriage and could potentially become the topic of a marital conflict.

Control and Power. Control and power are highly associated with the topics couples argue about. Indeed, control and power issues are the foundation of most conflicts. Typically, one person (or each person) is bent on having his or her own way. The saying “my way or the highway” is a common phrase used by someone with an inflexible perspective. If we see an issue one way and expect everyone else to see it the same way we do, then we are more likely to try to exert power and control over others and sway them to our perspective. Attempting to exert control and power over our partner typically results in win/lose or lose/lose outcomes for our marital friendships.

Things You Can Use

John Gottman (1994) is one of the nation’s leading researchers and practitioners regarding why marriages

are successful or unsuccessful. He and his colleagues have pinpointed nine skills that, if learned, can help couples communicate more effectively. As you read through the 9 Skills and their definitions in **Table 1**, check to see if **You (Y)** and/or your **Partner (P)** are doing them. Please remember that every couple has a degree of these *Don’ts* in their relationship. Rooting the *Don’ts* out of our marital friendships, while adding the *Do’s*, can result in the development of greater commitment, trust, and intimacy.

Tracking how we are regularly implementing the 9 Skills is an important way to measure our commitment, trust, and intimacy in our relationships. **Table 2** provides a way for you to do just that. At the end of each day (e.g., after you put the kids to bed), take a minute and put a “+” or a “-” next to each skill to track how well you did with each of them throughout the day. Post your tracking sheet in a prominent location. If you are parents, consider putting this sheet up on the refrigerator door next to your children’s homework (as “Mom’s and Dad’s homework”) to remind you how you are doing. When you succeed at implementing these 9 Skills consistently, you can then better help your partner and children learn how to implement these skills successfully. Implementing the 9 Skills will definitely help you be more satisfied (happy) in your relationships. Good luck!

Helpful Websites

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center—<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>

Stronger Marriages—<http://strongermarriage.org>

References

Gottman, J.M. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Fireside.

Markman, H.J., S.M. Stanley, and S.L. Blumberg. (2010). *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schramm, D.G., and V.W. Harris. (2011). Marital quality and income: An examination of the influence of government assistance. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 32, 437–448.

Table 1. Understanding the 9 Important Communication Skills (Adapted from Gottman 1994)

| Y | P | The Four Don'ts |
|---|---|---|
| | | <i>Criticism</i> – Attacking someone's personality or character with accusation and blame (e.g., "You never think of anyone else," or "How can you be so selfish?"). |
| | | <i>Contempt</i> – Intentional insulting, name-calling, mocking, rolling the eyes, or sneering. |
| | | <i>Defensiveness</i> – Feeling injured by others in response to criticism and contempt and refusing to take responsibility for personal actions. Being defensive blocks a couple's ability to deal with an issue. Even if one partner feels completely justified in his/her actions, becoming defensive will only add to the couple's problems. |
| | | <i>Stonewalling</i> – Withdrawing from interactions and refusing to communicate at all. When couples refuse to communicate about their issues, the relationship becomes fragile. (Note: It is completely fair in a relationship to explain to your partner that you are overloaded emotionally and that you need to call a "Time Out" to take a break and calm down before you say something you don't mean). |
| Y | P | The Five Do's |
| | | <i>Calm Down</i> – If your heart is beating more than 90 beats-per-minute, it becomes more difficult to access the "logical" part of your brain. Disengaging from an interaction before something hurtful is said should last for at least 25 minutes or longer for a person to really calm down. Otherwise, it is easy to slip back into an emotionally charged conversation and to say things that are hurtful and damaging to the marital friendship. |
| | | <i>Complain</i> – Being passive and sweeping relationship issues under the rug by internalizing our complaints and emotions without expressing them will only serve to trip us up later on. Bringing up a complaint about a specific issue or behavior is actually one of the healthiest activities a couple can engage in (e.g., "When you fail to call me to let me know you are going to be late, it makes me feel like you aren't considering my feelings and the fact that I will worry about you"). |
| | | <i>Speak Non-Defensively</i> – This kind of language is an art form that usually includes speaking with a soft voice, using complaint statements that start with "I feel..." rather than "You..." statements, and garnering the listener's trust in our ability to communicate effectively without eliciting defensiveness. "We" statements can also be helpful (e.g., "We need to start going to the gym." or "We should talk about money issues."). |
| | | <i>Validate</i> – To validate another person we must: |
| | | <i>Overlearn Skills</i> – To overlearn means to master the 8 other skills so that they remain available to you even when you are tired, stressed, or angry. |

Table 2. Tracking Sheet for Week: ____ *Implementing the 9 Communication Skills*

| Target Behavior | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday | Totals |
|-----------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| 1. Don't Criticize | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Don't Become Defensive | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Don't Use Contempt | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Don't Stonewall | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Do Calm Down | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Do Complain (using I-messages) | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Do Speak Non-Defensively | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Do Validate | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Do Overlearn 9 Skills | | | | | | | | |