

Sharpening Your Communication Skills With the One You Love



By Joy Quanrud Grimsley, MFT, EMDR, Center for Therapy & Meditation

One of the first complaints that I hear from couples in therapy is that their communication needs improvement. Each person feels criticized, blamed, or judged. Many couples mention that their arguments are often about the same issue. If this sounds familiar, the good news is that this situation is common and you're not alone. The bad news is that if you don't do something about it, each of you will build resentments which will ultimately create intimacy barriers. Communication gridlock leads to emotional withdrawal and even relationship loneliness. No one wants to feel unheard, misunderstood, disrespected, and emotionally lonely.

Conflict doesn't necessarily mean the relationship is falling apart. In fact, conflict gives us the opportunity to grow, learn communication skills, and deepen our intimacy levels. Understanding how to manage the relationship conflicts, while respecting each other's differences, can lead to a lovely and fulfilling journey through life with the person you love the most.

Conflict avoidance is not the answer to getting along; it only postpones the inevitable. This kind of 'keeping the peace' is like filling up an underground storage tank with hurts and disappointments until it bubbles up to the surface in the form of an explosion or withdrawal. Differences in personalities may be something you can't change, but how you manage your conflict is key. The following tips won't solve all your problems, but they will truly improve your communication.

Your delivery. If you're not happy with your partner's behavior, remember that your delivery about your unhappiness is an essential component to making a positive change. You can't expect someone to be motivated to change when they're being blamed, criticized, and judged. For example, an attack sounds like: "Why can't you help me with taking out the garbage? You don't help out! Stop being so lazy!" Instead, describe your own feelings in order to avoid criticism and contempt. For example, "I feel overwhelmed with the chores lately, and I need your help. Can you please help me?" If you have agreed upon a distribution of chores, you may ask, "I've noticed the garbage hasn't been taken out. Are you still okay with handling that chore?" Avoid a sentence that starts with 'you'. Speak about how you feel, and be clear about your needs.

The aggression of silence. Sometimes one person in the relationship is verbally assertive and insistent in a conflict while the other one becomes silent or withdrawing. When assertiveness becomes verbal aggression, the passive partner may simply walk away. Make no mistake: walking-out on a conversation or keeping total silence is also an expression of aggression, because it may be interpreted as being uncaring or rude. It's important to respect each person's comfort level with intense emotions. A great solution to this particular imbalance is to implement a "time-out."

Take a 'time-out.' When you're both in a loving state of mind, negotiate when and how to implement 'time-outs.' The initiator of the time out may use a hand gesture such as a "T" symbol and state in a calm voice, "I want/need a time-out." or "I feel overwhelmed/too angry, and need a time-out." The other partner must acknowledge that the time out has been called, and agree to stop. Time-outs are critical in football, and they ought to be even more important in our relationships, as the stakes are high. Time-outs can bring our physiological responses back to baseline. When stressed and angry, our fight-flight-freeze response is activated, causing our heart rate and blood pressure to increase. It's also a time when we say things that we later regret. During the time out, do something relaxing, as it takes 20-60 minutes to return to a state of calm. Time outs are intended to help us think about ways to improve the situation instead of ruminating over what or who makes us feeling terrible and desperate. Focus on your own state of mind.

Owning your mistake. Nothing is worse than people with so much pride that they can't own the fact that their delivery was poor and mean spirited. It's best to quickly say, "Oops, my delivery was poor. I'm sorry. Let me try to say things differently." Each person must admit their role in the problem. You may hold fast to the point you're trying to make, but deliver it in a different manner.

Take note of your non-verbals. A lack of respect towards each other can lead to great resentment. A smirk, an eye-roll, and other facial gestures can send your partner a negative and destructive message without uttering a single word. The number of positive interactions must outweigh the negative ones by a long shot, if we want to maintain an environment that is conducive to problem solving and respect. It is hard to feel loving towards someone who doesn't show you respect. Disrespect can also lead to a lack of physical intimacy because a person may not want to be physically close with a partner who has been hurtful.

Use the tool of paraphrasing. I find that couples talk "at" each other, and not "with" each other. Talking over your partner means you're not listening and it looks like you don't care. It may cause your partner to keep repeating the same message in different ways. Acknowledging what is being heard is essential in moving the conflict forward. One solution is to *paraphrase* the message back to the messenger. For example, "Ok, what I understood you say is"

This allows the messenger to clarify if the message was not really understood. We're all looking for improved relationships because they are a great source of health and joy. They can help us feel fulfilled and connected. I challenge you to make February the month you decide to practice some of these communication tools!