

Identifying and Solving Problems in Communication

Objective

To strengthen your relationship through effective communication.

You Should Know

Problems with communication have a significant negative effect on relationship satisfaction. Poor communication is one of the most frequent and damaging relationship difficulties and is often why couples seek help from therapists. These behaviors contribute to poor communication:

- Complaining
- Blaming
- Frequently using sarcasm
- Stonewalling (acting detached, cold, distant, or indifferent)
- Criticizing
- Being judgmental
- Mocking or belittling
- Being overly defensive

When you avoid poor communication behaviors, and you express yourself to your partner in constructive and healthy ways, you deepen your connection and strengthen the relationship. Each of you will feel understood, and when problems arise, your connection will remain strong.

Good communication does not have to involve agreement. You and your partner can respectfully agree to disagree, understanding where each of you is coming from. Good communication promotes better understanding, acceptance, and collaboration—instead of constant disagreement and conflict.

It is particularly important during conflict or times of stress that you and your partner slow down and really listen. Quickly responding to assumed (rather than actual) messages leads to ineffective and unhelpful communication, often escalating conflict.

Consider the following tips to have calm and respectful conversations:

Speaker

Be specific.

Be brief.

Be as positive as possible.

Use “I” statements.

Listener

Listen attentively; do not interrupt.

Reflect what your partner is saying or feeling.

Summarize what you think was said.

Ask for additional information.

Be clear about what is helpful.

Don't counterattack or be defensive.

Avoid "you" statements.

Clarify without excusing.

Avoid blame, insults, accusations.

Find points of agreement.

Avoid labels or absolute statements.

Apologize or express regret, if appropriate.

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate each communication problem on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = this is not a problem in our relationship, and 10 = this is a major problem in our relationship.

My partner:

_____ criticizes me frequently.

_____ finds fault with everything I do.

_____ offers advice when I don't ask for it (instead of listening to what I have to say).

_____ doesn't listen to me.

_____ tends to talk too much.

_____ frequently yells or screams.

_____ avoids conflict.

_____ interrupts.

_____ apologizes too much.

_____ often says "you always" or "you never."

_____ constantly nags.

_____ has to have the last word.

_____ gives me the silent treatment.

_____ insists that they are always right.

_____ shows very little interest in me.

_____ assumes or jumps to conclusions.

_____ enjoys arguing or debating.

_____ brings up issues at inopportune times, like when one of us is angry, stressed, tired, or hungry.

Add up your score: _____

If you scored between 18–70, you might have slight problems in communication.

If you scored between 71–130, you have moderate problems with communication.

If you scored more than 131 points, there are several problems in communication to address.

Schedule a fifteen-to-thirty-minute chat with each other, twice a week for one month. During your time together, eliminate all distractions and focus on each other. You might begin with “safe” conversations before moving onto more controversial topics. Note the date and time, and the topic discussed, and rate each chat on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = it really didn’t go well, and 10 = it deepened our connection. Note your and your partner’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during each chat.

Date/time	Topic	How did it go?	Thoughts, feelings, behaviors

Did you find the communication tips helpful when practicing this exercise? Why or why not?

What, if anything surprised you during this exercise?

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

Does Technology Interfere with Your Relationship?

Objective

To minimize any negative effects that technology may be having on your relationship.

You Should Know

Technology has changed the way we live, including our intimate relationships. With the increased use of email, texting, instant messaging, and social media, couples are on their devices more than ever. In some ways this change has been for the better, as it is easier for people to be connected and to communicate their thoughts and needs. But in other ways, technology can get in the way of authentic communication and intimacy.

Many couples struggle to find a balance. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, one in four cell phone owners in a relationship found their partner too distracted by their cell phone. Nearly one in ten had argued with a partner about spending too much time on their devices. Even those who didn't report addictive use still complained that their partner was frequently distracted by sounds or notifications, like a dog salivating to Pavlov's ringing bell.

Another study of 143 married women, conducted by Brandon McDaniel, PhD, a professor at Penn State University, concluded the following:

- 62% said technology interferes with their leisure time together.
- 40% said their partner gets distracted by the TV during a conversation.
- 35% said their partner will respond to a notification even in the middle of a conversation.
- 33% said their partner checks the phone during mealtimes they spend together.
- 25% said their partner actively texts other people during the couple's face-to-face conversations.

Do these patterns sound familiar?

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down the devices and applications you use on a regular basis and estimate how much time you spend per day on each device, noting the mode of communication (for example, text, email, IM, social media, etc.). For help in assessing your device time, you can install a time-tracking app such as [Moment](#) or [\(OFFTIME\)](#).

Device/app/mode of communication	Time spent daily

Now, write down the devices your partner uses and estimate how much time they spend on that device.

Device/app/mode of communication	Time spent daily

What positive effects does technology have on your relationship (for example, convenient planning, sharing thoughts and feelings, sharing news)?

What are the negative effects of technology use (for example, lack of face-to-face time; difficulty having a conversation without interruption; irritability, depression, or moodiness)?

Make a plan to sit down with your partner to discuss how you both can change your use of technology. For example;

- Share, in person, your concerns with your partner. Resist the urge to hide behind the “safety” and “anonymity” of texting or emails.
- Make a plan to reduce time on devices—set a goal of limiting tech use to a specific number of minutes per day. Then stick to it.
- Alternatively, carefully schedule in your use of technology (for example, 7:00 to 7:15; Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram)
- Install a blocking app that restricts your access to social media.
- Don’t text during meals.
- Shut off all devices an hour before bedtime. Use that time to talk to each other, and be sure to make eye contact.
- Schedule other device-free time together to share your thoughts and feelings.
- Make time to be in nature, walking, hiking, doing shared activities.
- Introduce a weekly device-free romantic “date night.”
- Take a meditation or yoga class together.
- Go to the gym.

Add your own ideas here:

Setting limits and finding alternatives to technology is something you can do together. Make compromises if necessary; that is, if you must keep your phone on because your kids might call, do not take any other calls or texts during that time.

Which alternatives seem the easiest and most fun for you? Explain.

Which alternatives seem the most challenging? Explain.

Of the challenging alternatives you identified, which one can you commit to trying within the next week or so?

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

Is Your Relationship Affected by Your Deep-Seated Fears?

Objective

To minimize overreacting by recognizing when disagreements are fueled by your deep-seated fears.

You Should Know

All couples disagree at times. If you and your partner are like most couples, you have many kinds of disagreements. Many may be minor, but some may be so hurtful that you might think your relationship is over. Sometimes seemingly petty problems become blown out of proportion because they trigger deep-seated fears. Researchers have determined that there are five core fears:

Extinction—the fear of ceasing to physically exist. The fear of extinction is not simply a fear of death, but a fear of “not being.”

Mutilation—the fear of losing a body part or the thought of having the body’s boundaries violated, or of losing the integrity of natural functions.

Loss of autonomy—the fear of being immobilized, paralyzed, restricted, enveloped, overwhelmed, entrapped, imprisoned, smothered, or otherwise controlled by circumstances beyond your control.

Separation—the fear of abandonment, rejection, and loss of connectedness. This fear refers to feeling unwanted, disrespected, or devalued.

Death of self—the fear of humiliation, shame, or any other mechanism of profound self-disapproval. This loss of self or identity may result in total disintegration of one’s perceived lovability, capability, and worthiness.

Understanding how disagreements are related to your deep-seated fears can help keep you from overreacting to small problems. Most disagreements can be handled by a simple problem-solving process, an agreement by both people to work on the problem, and by developing an attitude of compassion toward yourself and your partner.

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

When you have an argument or when you simply feel critical of your partner, write down what you are feeling. Then see if you can identify whether a deep-seated fear is associated with your feelings.