

Communication Strategies for Adult Couples

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Communication is basic to a relationship. What is communication? The word means “to make common.” It is the process of interacting, of creating and negotiating meanings. Your feelings, communication style, family of origin, gender, and culture all affect your communication.

Poor communication can lead to problems, including conflict. Conflict itself, however, is not a problem—depending on how you handle it. All couples argue and disagree at times. If you can learn to “fight fairly,” your chances of staying together are high. When you are in conflict with your partner, ask yourself: “What can we learn from this? How can we grow from this situation?”

The process of communicating can be more important than the actual message. *How* we communicate affects *what* we communicate.

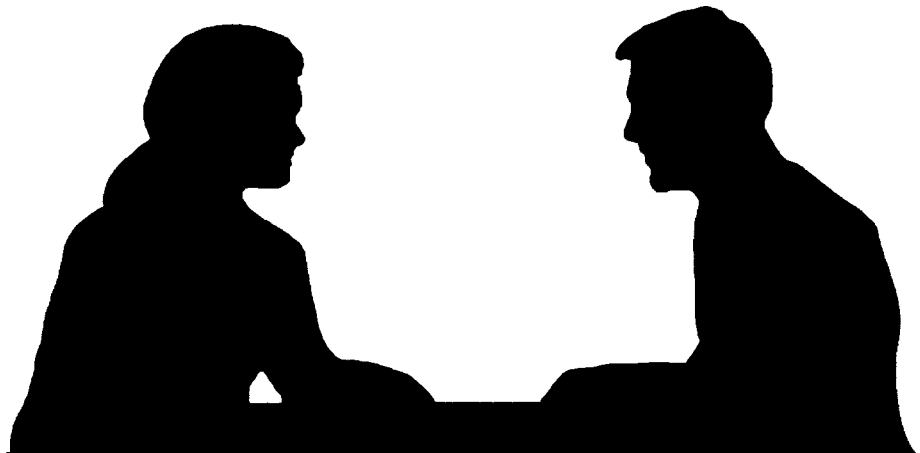
According to some research, couples who describe themselves as “happy” do the following more often than couples who describe themselves as “unhappy”:

- Talk with each other
- Discuss personal topics
- Avoid dwelling on topics of conflict
- Paraphrase each other
- Are sensitive to each other’s feelings
- Keep communication channels open
- Use nonverbal communication

Characteristics of enduring relationships

Learning to accept and tolerate differences and weaknesses in relationships is important. Research studies have identified five important characteristics of enduring relationships:

- Intimacy
- Commitment



Reflective listening

Listening is an important part of communicating well. “Reflective listening” can help you communicate better. Here are a few of the do’s and don’ts of reflective listening.

Do

- Listen with more than your ears
- Watch your partner’s face
- Watch your body language
- Watch your partner’s body language
- Listen for your tone of voice
- Listen for your partner’s tone of voice
- Repeat back what you hear so everything has been understood
- Share roles of sender and receiver
- Be totally present
- Take responsibility for your own behavior

Don’t

- Interrupt
- Make sarcastic comments
- Judge or criticize
- Ignore feelings
- Think of what you’ll say next
- Make broad, negative statements
- Cross-complain
- Use irrational tactics

- Communication
- Congruence (shared perceptions of how the relationship is going and shared expectations of the relationship)
- World view (religious/spiritual orientation)

Persevere in your relationship. When things are hard, enduring couples are optimistic that things will improve.

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Steps to use in communicating

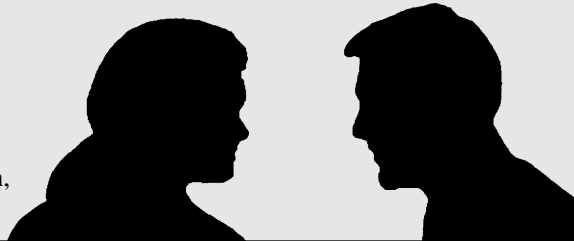
- Recognize when an issue needs to be discussed—deal with the issue when it arises, rather than letting it build up and then explode
- Set a time that is mutually acceptable and without distractions
- Use good communication skills—listen carefully, and take turns speaking and listening
- Respect each other; be courteous
- Define the topic, issue, or problem specifically; stick to one issue
- Speak for yourself only; share feelings; identify how you think your behavior contributes to the problem
- Realize that happiness is inside a person, rather than something someone else provides for you
- Don't take your partner for granted
- Take a timeout, if necessary

Just sharing and listening may take care of the issue. If not, you may need to problem solve:

- Identify alternative solutions
- Focus
- Compromise
- Negotiate solutions
- Implement a solution

Later:

- Evaluate the solution
- Think of another solution, if necessary



Positive support: building self-esteem

Valuing yourself and others is important. It involves sharing, appreciating, being affectionate, and providing a sense of belonging.

Expressing appreciation

Steps in the appreciation cycle include:

- Identifying
- Expressing
- Receiving

Learn to see the positive in the other. Express I-statements such as: "I appreciate . . . I especially enjoy . . . I love you because . . ." It's also important to receive appreciation graciously, rather than to brush it off. Tell your partner you feel good that she/he noticed. When you feel appreciated, you feel better about yourself. Just like children, our

self-worth rises when we receive positive strokes. On the other hand, when we are put down, it can take a lot of positive strokes to make up the hurt.

Summary

Building a strong relationship as partners will affect you as individuals, as a couple, and as a family. This building process takes commitment, effort, and patience. It can provide joy, challenge, and opportunities for growth. A good relationship is full of vitality. Set goals for the relationship. Make it a priority in your lives!

Other resources

In addition to this publication, Oregon State University Extension offers a 2-hour program (or two 1-hour segments) titled "Couples Communication: A Program for Adults." The

program provides details on communication, and time to practice and observe. If you would like to have this program in your county, call your local office of the OSU Extension Service and ask for the home economics agent. Extension offices are listed under "County Governments" in your telephone directory.

For further reading

- Duncan, S. (1993). *The Family Times*. Extension Service. Bozeman, MT: Montana State University.
- Pearson, J.C. (1993). *Gender and communication*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Robinson, L., & Blanton, P. (1993). Marital strengths in enduring marriages. *Family Relations*, 42, 38–45.
- Rupured, M., & Quick, S. *Family vitality*. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.
- The University of Nebraska Extension Service. *Creating vital healthy families; Listening for effective conflict management* (videos).

OSU Extension publications:

- EC 1436, *Communication Through Family Meetings: A Resource for Parents of Pre-teens and Adolescents*, 50¢
- EC 1412, *Nontraditional Families*, 75¢
- EC 1375, *Planning in Advance for Health Care Decisions*, 50¢

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