

## **9. Communication Between Couples: How to Communicate in a Relationship**

Most people have never learned how to communicate. Without this skill, a person is handicapped in an intimate relationship. Without being able to express themselves and listen to another, partners cannot achieve intimacy. By developing your communication skills, you and your partner will be able to establish and preserve a loving, respectful relationship between two people who love each other.

### **9.1 The Purpose of Communication in Relationships**

One of the biggest problems in communicating is that most couples have a basic misconception of what the purpose of communication is. Most approach talking with a partner as a debate in which each presents a preconceived version of the reality of what is going on between the two partners.

The fault with this approach is the mistaken assumption that either partner can go into the conversation with an accurate perception of reality. This is not possible because neither person has the necessary information to determine what reality is, that is: what is going on between them.

One purpose of communication is to determine what reality is. Communication involves the collaboration of two people as they share and examine all of their perceptions, feelings, ideas and thoughts to come to an accurate understanding of what is happening.

### **9.2 Collaborative Communication**

Everyone knows that communication is simply a matter of talking and listening. However, most of us mistakenly believe that the matter of communicating is simple. We fail to realize that rather than involving innate abilities, communication involves specific skills can be learned and developed in ourselves in order to talk with and listen to our loved ones.

Step 1: Approaching a conversation with your partner

Step 2: Talking to your partner

Step 3: Listening to your partner

Step 4: Determining reality with your partner

### **9.3 Step 1: Approaching a Conversation with Your Relationship Partner**

Rule #1 to follow when going into a conversation with your partner: unilaterally disarm. That is, give up the need to be right!! You are not going into a battle that you have to win.

This is not to say that you will have to compromise or capitulate. This is not to say that you can't be angry, frustrated or provoked. You have a right to all of your thoughts and feelings.

Just consider that your partner may have something to say that is worth listening to and considering. This conversation is not a battleground where you must prove that you are right; it is not a fight that you must win.

### **9.4 Step 2: Talking to Your Relationship Partner**

Going into a conversation, there is only one reality that a person can be sure of: you can know what your own thoughts, feelings and perceptions are. You can be sure of nothing else: not the other person's thoughts, feelings or perceptions; not even the reality of what is going on between the two of you.

The only thing that you and your partner each needs to bring to the conversation is something that each of you can be sure of: your own thoughts, feelings and perceptions. However, talking personally about yourself is often more challenging than you might think.

#### **Focus on yourself.**

It is an unfortunate reality that, within almost all couples, one person is victimized by the other. As a result, the focus of many of their discussions is on blaming each other. In your effort to talk about yourself, avoid the temptation to lapse into attacking, accusing, criticizing or blaming your partner.

You are here to talk about you. Not about your partner or the kids or work or your friends. About you. What would you say about yourself? Look at your partner and think of what you could reveal about yourself to him-her at this moment.

#### **Reveal feelings that are embarrassing or humiliating.**

It is important to recognize your irrational feelings. Don't dismiss them as being inappropriate, immature or meaningless. Make an effort to talk about the feelings that you would much rather skip over. The feelings that you fear will cause you embarrassment or humiliation should you disclose them.

For example, if you feel hurt or disappointed discuss these feelings with your partner. Avoid the temptation to defend yourself by becoming victimized and righteous. This is not about how you shouldn't be hurt or disappointed. It is just about the simple truth that you are hurt or disappointed, and that it is causing you emotional pain.

### **Reveal your personal wants.**

People often feel embarrassed to talk about what they want. Not the easy wants: I want to go to that new restaurant, I want a new jacket, I want to go on a trip. But the personal wants that come from deep down in you where you feel the most vulnerable: I want you to complement me, I want to be affectionate with you, I want to have a baby with you.

Many of us have grown up feeling ashamed of our wants. However, the more that you communicate on this level, the more in touch with yourself you will be—the more authentic you will be as a person—the closer your partner will be able to feel to you.

When you and your partner communicate on this personal level, many of the trivial issues between you vanish. It becomes apparent that they were merely inconsequential issues meant to distract you in your relationship.

Finally, talk to your partner with the decency and respect with which you talk to anyone else.

Most people have a special way of communicating that they reserve for their partners. What makes it special is that it includes abusive behaviors such as: being complaining, demanding, bossy, irritable, sarcastic, childish, parental, condescending...to name a few.

When you are talking with your partner, stop and ask yourself: "Would I be talking like this to anyone else?" Do you hear yourself complaining (I'm so tired!) or demanding (Get me a drink of water!!) or deferring (What should I order for dinner?) in ways you never hear yourself with other people?

Try to treat your partner with the respect and decency with which you treat any other person....after all, your partner is another person.

### **9.5 Step 3: Listening to Your Relationship Partner**

Going into a conversation, you have very little awareness of what your partner really thinks and feels. You may think you do because you recognize an expression that he-she always gets when he-she is hurt. Or you might have even exchanged some heated words. But until you have listened to your partner, you know almost nothing.

Listening is a skill that needs to be learned and developed. Just because we hear does not mean that we are listening. Only when we listen with an unconditional interest in understanding the person who is talking to us, can we truly get to know that person.

#### **Listening is not about you.**

Listening is entirely about the person you are listening to. Put aside your point of view. Your thoughts, opinions or reactions to what the other person is saying are both irrelevant and inappropriate. The person talking is not looking to you for advice or guidance. What they truly need is to be heard so that they feel that they are being seen.

#### **Hear your partner out.**

When you put yourself aside, that is when you focus on what your partner is saying rather than on how you are reacting, you are making yourself available to listen to your partner. As your partner talks, try to sense what it feels like to be him-her.

Try to feel what your partner is experiencing. Empathize. Listen with your heart. When he-she relates an incident to you, try to feel how he-she felt in the situation. Make a special effort to empathize with what your partner is currently feeling while talking with you.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus spoke about empathy when he advised his young daughter, Scout, to “put on someone’s shoes and walk around for awhile.”

#### **Indicate that you are hearing your partner.**

It is not enough to listen silently. It is helpful to indicate to your partner that you are hearing him-her. During your conversation, reflect what your partner is saying and feeling. Repeat to him-her what you hear him-her saying and what you feel him-her feeling.

If your reflection is not accurate, your partner can correct you. You can then make adjustments until you have a true understanding of what your partner is trying to communicate to you. Reflecting lets your partner know that he-she is being heard, which makes him-her feeling seen by you.

### **Have compassion for your partner.**

As you listen to your partner with empathy and feel what he-she feels, you gain compassion for him-her as a person. You feel for him-her as a human being with personal pain and struggles like the rest of us.

You gain a new perspective. When you feel for your partner's issues, your own personal over-reactions to them seem unimportant. Giving advice or being judgmental suddenly seems condescending and patronizing. Acting hurt or victimized suddenly seems childish and self-indulgent. From this perspective, you see your partner as a separate person who you care about deeply as he-she deals with his-her own issues in life.

### **9.6 Step 4: Determine Reality with Your Relationship Partner**

In the process of talking personally about yourself as your partner truly listened, it is likely that you both came to a deeper understanding of what you were experiencing and feeling. Likewise, as your partner talked personally to you with you truly listening, both of you most likely came to a deeper understanding of your partner's experiences and feelings.

This level of insight and understanding along with the feelings of empathy and compassion that accompany it, help clarify much of the confusion that exists within the couple. The deeper awareness of each other eliminates many of the misconceptions, misinterpretations and miscommunications that go into creating this confusion. What remains is a clearer picture of yourselves and of the reality of your relationship.

At this point in the conversation, you and your partner may want to review what you have learned about yourselves and each other and about your relationship. By discussing what you have learned, you can identify the personal issues and reactions that tend to lead to trouble between you. You will now know what to look out for to avoid trouble in the future. And if you do get into trouble with each other, you can recognize what is happening and deal with it more quickly.

## **Helpful Advice about Communication**

There are several negative forms of communication to be aware of. Make sure that you are not engaging in any of these because they contaminate the communication process. As long as you are enlisting these techniques, you can be sure that you and your partner will become more and more alienated and estranged from each other.

Communication should bring you and your partner closer to each other. It should be used to break down the barriers that keep you apart, not to build up fortifications between you.

### **Intimidation: A Common Relationship Issue**

One of the most effective techniques that couples use to manipulate, control and punish each other is intimidation. According to the dictionary, to intimidate is to frighten into submission.

Interestingly enough, couples report that the behaviors they are intimidated by are not those that are overt and aggressive. Rather partners are frightened by the subtle covert behaviors that leave them feeling guilty and responsible for their mate's unhappiness.

During a conversation between a couple, if one partner responds by being miserable, self-hating or self-destructive, it is virtually impossible for the other partner not to submit. The conversation is over; the intimidating partner has won.

But in reality, both people have suffered disastrous defeats. The dictionary goes on to say that to intimidate "implies reduction to a state where the spirit is broken or all courage is lost." This certainly defines the emotional state of the partner who has been frightened into submission. Likewise, the cost to intimidating person is also high. The intimidating partner must forfeit his-her autonomy, after which his-her spirit is broken and courage is lost.

### **Parental or Childish Communicating**

Watch out for ways that you might be communicating from a childish or parental stance. Childish communications involve deferring and submitting, looking for direction or definition, being servile or subservient, seeking approval and/or criticism. Parental communications involve directing and dominating, being condescending and assertive, acting judgmental and critical.

None of these qualities has a place in the communications between two independent adults in an equal relationship. Be respectful of yourself and respectful of your partner in the way that you speak to each other.

### **Non-verbal Communication in Relationships**

Non-verbal communication refers to how one's body language contributes to the process of communicating feelings and reactions. Non-verbal communication is not a negative form of communicating. On the contrary, it can be very helpful in trying to understand what a person is saying.

Sometimes what a person is saying does not coincide with what he-she is communicating non-verbally. These mixed messages often cause confusion. First you must acknowledge both messages, even though they conflict. Then you have to decide which one more accurately communicates what the person is thinking or feeling. Often the non-verbal message is more truthful.

Many of these mixed messages are communicated in couple relationships. A partner may say "I love you" throughout the day then behave indifferently and unaffectionate. A partner may declare interest and concern about his/her mate but whenever the mate talks about him-herself, the partner actually interrupts or becomes distracted.

Pay attention to what your actions are saying. Make your actions and words match. In other words, be truthful in how you communicate both verbally and non-verbally.