

Relationship Communication

(“How well do we communicate?”)



Your ability to communicate is probably the most essential ingredient to the health of your relationship. Most of what we call “communication” is not really communication at all. It is blaming, complaining, judging, criticizing, accusing, defending or gossiping. Most of the time this type of “communication” is characterized with sentences that begin with “You” or “It”. When I begin my sentences with the word “you” or “it”, I am putting my attention “over there” and not seeking to be aware of what’s “over here”. When I say “you” or “it” I am avoiding my own experience in the moment.

True communication is making myself *known* to another. It is opening up and sharing my *immediate* experience. When I put my attention “over there” I am avoiding the fact that I am upset but I don’t acknowledge my upset as mine. I make *you* responsible, I make *you* the “cause” and so I can do nothing until I succeed in trying to change you and control you, which of course is impossible. I never really address my own upset and so I never really deal with it or talk about it.

This is the bind that virtually every relationship is in at least to some extent. Can I really open up to my partner and be honest with who I am? We always answer “no” to that question because we are afraid of being vulnerable, we are afraid of being our honest self.

The following exercise will help you to identify some communication patterns and difficulties. As you become aware of patterns that don’t work, you will gradually develop those that do. As a reminder, the purpose of these exercises is to help you become aware of what *is* and facing your own reality. **You cannot deal effectively with anything without acknowledging the facts as you experience them.** As you go through the list of questions, highlight the ones you answer “True” to and then write a few sentences in your journal how you see and feel what is happening.

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| 1. I often can’t find the right words to express what I want to say. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 2. I worry that exposing myself to my partner will result in rejection. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 3. I often don’t talk because I am afraid my opinion is wrong. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 4. Speaking up will only make things worse. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 5. I talk too much and don’t give my partner a chance to speak. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 6. I don’t look forward to talking to my partner. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |

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| 7. Once I get started in an argument, I have trouble stopping. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 8. My speech is often defensive. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 9. I frequently bring up his or her past failures. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 10. My actions don't match what I say. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 11. I don't really listen. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 12. I try to repay anger with anger or insult with insult. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 13. I tease my mate too much. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 14. I talk about really important things too rarely. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 15. I often lie by omission. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 16. I hate it when my partner brings up a problem. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 17. I think it's important to lay out to my partner all of the complaints I have about him or her. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 18. I state my complaints in a heated manner. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 19. I tend to say, "You always" or "You never" when discussing my complaints with my partner. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 20. I rarely state my complaints so as to keep from hurting my spouse. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 21. I don't like to argue because I feel arguing reflects badly on the relationship. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 22. I don't like to discuss our negative feelings because it only makes us feel worse. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| 23. I don't feel I should have to bring up what's bothering me because my partner should already know. | <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False |

One fact that is not widely recognized is that it is impossible to *not* communicate. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are always communicating *something*. Every communication between two people has at least two aspects to it: 1) *the spoken words that are used*, or the factual information that is conveyed, and 2) *the unspoken words*, or the statement about the relationship between the two people who are communicating. Consider the simple statement with the *spoken words*, "The dishes are all dirty". A husband might say this in an *unspoken*, haughty tone of voice that says, "I'm so much better than you, you incompetent slob," or a friendly tone that says "I'll be glad to help you with this." A wife might say the same sentence in a heavy voice that says, "I'm exhausted; please do the dishes for me," a hurt tone that says "Look what you've done to me!" or an angry tone that says, "Damn you, I'm not going to clean up after you anymore!" The possibilities are endless.

The factual content of any message is usually easy to get agreement on: either the dishes are all dirty or they aren't. The implied message about the *relationship* is more difficult to understand. This is partly because it is somewhat hidden and unclear, and is based on the thoughts, emotions and belief systems of each party involved. Belief systems define the relationship, how it *should* be and how each person in the relationship

is *supposed* to act. When each party defines the relationship in different ways, it usually results in a continuing battle of manipulation and control.

Relationship beliefs carry with it implications about who should do what for whom. *"I am boss and you are employee, so you should listen to me and do it my way—even if you know more about it than I do"* or *"You are my wife, so you should cook for me—even if you are sick and you have more time and energy"* would hardly ever be so clearly spoken, yet it is typically the first part of the message to be heard. In every communication, there are *always* these two components to the message—the content and a statement about the relationship. *More often than not, it is the unspoken relationship message that gets heard first* and so it is important to clarify what is really being communicated in our messages. If I am friendly and responding to you lovingly and as an equal, you will hear this message first and respond accordingly. If I am self-righteous and trying to make you bad and wrong, you will hear this message first and probably react defensively. It matters very little what I am saying with my words. It's my *thoughts, emotions* and *beliefs* about the relationship that takes precedence over every communication.

If I am surprised that my partner responds to me the way he or she does, it could be the result of not being aware of what I am really communicating. That is one reason why it is so important to acknowledge and take responsibility for my underlying emotions. It is my unfinished negative emotions that fuel my negative thoughts, which in turn reinforce my negative beliefs, that in turn affect the quality of my relationship.

Differences and disagreement have to be dealt with, and most people will try to reach agreement. If real agreement is not possible, most people will then try to achieve the *appearance* of agreement by stuffing their emotions or manipulating the other person into changing so that the difference disappears. If these efforts fail, the differentness is fought—rejected and pushed away, walled off, or destroyed. At best there is uneasy truce that is called tolerance.

If I have a difference with you, the real way to settle it is this: 1) Express clearly how I feel about the difference, what is important for me, and what I want from you. 2) Listen to your feelings and wants and what is important to you, 3) Come to some kind of agreement or solution, or 4) if possible, decide to meet my needs elsewhere or give up demanding it my own way. Many people are neither willing to compromise and agree or let go of demanding something that the other is unwilling to provide.

When you can explore the *feelings* that you have in a disagreement, you often find that the real argument has little to do with what you are arguing about. An argument about where to go on vacation might be only a symptom of two people's assumptions: *"If you loved me, you'd do it my*

way." Or, "If you respected me, you'd do it my way." The fears behind these assumptions are quite similar, "I am afraid you don't love/respect me." The feelings beneath these fears may be even more similar: feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, loneliness, etc. At this deeper level, you will often discover that you and your partner actually have a great deal in common. Your surface disagreement may be only an expression of the differences in the way that you each avoid or cope with deeper feelings and experiences.

No decision about the vacation can be really satisfactory unless these deeper levels of experience are recognized, expressed, and listened to. When I get in touch with my feelings and express them to you and you really listen to me, I probably won't care where we go on vacation! On the other hand, sometimes significant and disturbing differences remain between us, even after this deeper exploration. In this case we can at least accept that these differences exist. We can stop trying to change each other to eliminate those differences, and stop blaming each other when these manipulations aren't successful.

The real world of honest communication sometimes has pain, conflict and other unpleasantness. It also has pleasure, satisfying activities, joy and participation. When I stay in contact with my reality I can make the most out of a situation. If I reject reality and try to impose my relationship beliefs, I only add confusion to my pain and lose whatever satisfactions and pleasures I do have.