

Communication Tips for Couples

Active listening/Use feedback

- Active listening is the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information and respond thoughtfully.
- Intention to listen to your partner is key. Try to listen without getting distracted by your own thoughts or other distractions.
- Don't interrupt your partner while they are sharing, nor try to solve the problem when not asked.
- To take active listening a step further, share feedback.
- Restate what you heard your partner say to demonstrate your listening and understanding. Then, clarify that you are understanding them correctly.
 - For example: "It sounds like you feel _____ because _____. Am I understanding you correctly?"
- Feedback also provides an opportunity to clear up any unclear signals and avoid mind reading, where you think that you know what your partner wants when in reality you are just projecting what you think.
- Active listening requires practice to improve. The more you do it, the easier it gets.

Use "I" statements

- Make sure your tone is soft and even, not blaming.
- Always start each statement with "I": I feel, I need, I want...
- Then, follow the "I" with an emotion before explaining why.
- In your explanation, gently describe how your partner's actions affect you.
 - "I feel _____ when you _____ because _____."
 - "I feel hurt when you go so long without calling, because I'm afraid you don't care."

Edit criticism

- When communicating with your partner, make an effort to avoid personal criticism. Refrain from insults, put-downs, and negative body language.
- Criticism inhibits the listening process and can lead to further escalation of hurt feelings.

Be gentle and stay calm

- Be aware of the tone you use when communicating problems. Bring up any problems gently and without blame. Speak in a mutual respectful tone.
- Try to keep discussions as calm as possible.
- If escalation occurs, take a break and revisit the conversation when you and your partner feel less emotionally charged.
- Be mindful of your self-talk: Are you trying to remain calm or fueling your distress?

Acknowledge first, explain later

- Focus your energy on understanding your partner and their perspective first, instead of emphasizing your own desire to be understood.
- Then, provide feedback to your partner to demonstrate your understanding.
- Later, you can calmly explain your perspective.

Empathize with your partner

- Try to put yourself in your partner's shoes and be willing to with their perspective and suggestions.

Validate

- Let your partner know that you understand their point of view by validating them.
- Take responsibility for what you've done and apologize if necessary.

Have a positive attitude and open body language

- A negative attitude can deter the conversation in a poor way before it even begins.
- Make eye contact and demonstrate your acknowledgement physically

Remove other distractions

Avoid “kitchen sink-ing” and stick to the main point

- Kitchen sinking happens when an individual feels backed into a corner, so they bring up unrelated issues from the past in order to protect themselves. This inevitably escalates the discussion in a negative way.