

# Effective Communication in Relationships

The way couples communicate can enhance their relationship or lead to escalating disagreements and drive partners further apart

## The Cycle of Poor Communication

### Some examples of ineffective communication are:

- One partner has a demanding communication style that leads the other partner to refuse to communicate in response.
- One partner tries to manipulate the other with negative emotions, such as anger and sadness.
- One partner personally criticizes his/her partner, such as calling him/her 'lazy', rather than focusing on behaviors and the feelings they cause.

### Ways to break out of the cycle:

- Keep in mind the problem you are trying to solve or message you are trying to communicate. Avoid the temptation to make it about winning.
- Remove all distractions, such as television or radio noise, and arrange a time to talk that suits you both.
- Communicate your understanding of your partner's perspective. Even if you disagree, it is important that both partners feel heard. Summarize back what you have heard for accuracy before adding your perspective.
- Avoid labeling. Focus on behaviors that are problematic, not your partner as a person. ("I feel unappreciated when you don't help with the laundry" vs "You're lazy")

## Ways to improve communication

Communication skills are vital to working out relationship difficulties when they arise.

### Increase communication about positive (or neutral) things

- Sometimes when couples get busy and tired they start to talk more and more about what is not getting done. It is important to pay attention to and express appreciation for good and helpful things your partner does.

### Don't avoid the tough stuff

- Putting off talking about minor frustrations tends to allow them to build into big problems. If you can respectfully discuss frustrations early you can conquer them as mole-hills instead of mountains.

**Keep it specific**

- What behaviors in particular are bothering you?
  - Instead of, “You never help around the house” try something like “Can you please help me fold the laundry?”

**Keep it simple**

- What is the specific problem you want to fix right now? Raising past frustrations increases emotion and makes it more difficult to problem-solve the issue at hand.
  - If you want your partner to mow the lawn, stick with the topic of mowing the lawn. Choose to keep your frustrations over a different behavior for another conversation.

**Keep in mind that you care about this person**

- Make a list of reasons you fell in love, refer to that list when frustrated
- Place yourself in your partner’s shoes and try to understand his or her perspective

**Increasing Empathy in Communication**

Empathic communication shows your partner that you are interested in his/her perspective and care about how he/she feels. Increasing empathic communication helps with problem-solving, validates both partners’ point of view, and reduces blaming.

**Empathic communication has two parts:**

1. Listen and communicate to your partner that you have an understanding of and sensitivity to his/her side of an issue. (You don’t have to agree to be empathic.)
2. You present your opinion.
  - Example: “I understand that you are very busy at work, and tired when you come home. It still is important to me that we have family dinner together.”

**Be Willing to Compromise**

A healthy relationship shows mutual respect through compromise. It will be important to come up with a solution that you both can accept.

**Be Flexible:**

- If your goal is to have family dinner every night and your partner is feeling exhausted, maybe family dinner 3/5 nights of the week would be more reasonable.

## Other Important Tips

### Take a Time Out:

- When emotions are running high, either partner can call a “time out”
- A time-out is NOT forever. Both partners can take 10-15 minutes to cool down and re-focus before resuming the discussion
- It is critical that a timeout request be respected if one or both partners need to cool down.

## Golden rules for arguing constructively

### DO:

- Know why you are arguing before you start
- Devote some time to resolving the problem
- Sit down and make eye contact
- Speak personally about what you feel
- Acknowledge when the other person makes a valid point
- Agree to differ if you cannot agree
- Stick to the matter at hand
- Cease arguing and separate if there is any likelihood of violence

### DON'T:

- Behave aggressively or disrespectfully
- Deliberately hurt the other person's feelings
- Generalize problems to entire relationship
- Bring up old unresolved disputes
- Walk away without deciding when discussion will be resumed (unless violence threatens)
- Bring other peoples' opinions into the argument
- Argue about something for more than an hour, late at night or after drinking alcohol

## For More Information:

- Online:
  - For information on improving your communication try downloading the free smart phone application “Life Armor”
    - <http://www.t2.health.mil/apps/lifearmor>
- In Print:
  - The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman
- In Person:
  - Make an appointment with BHOP
  - Call for an appointment with a Military and Family Life Consultant (301-456-4256)