



Communication with Your Partner

We communicate any time we share meaning. While communication often involves words, they are not required. For example, when mom and dad tiptoe into their sleeping child's room, admire the sleeping one, and smile at each other, they have communicated even without saying a word. Or when one partner provides the other an admiring glance or gentle touch, there has been communication.

When people roll their eyes, hug, walk away, blow a kiss, huff, smile, clench their teeth, hold hands or shake their heads they communicate. Early in a romantic relationship we generally talk often and listen wholeheartedly. We also tend to hug, hold hands and show lots of affection. Later in that relationship we sometimes use communication only for business or disagreements. That is unfortunate.

One of the best uses of communication may be for people to **share the simple events of the day**. The topics of discussion should not be sources of disagreement. Each person can tell about joys and frustrations in the day. Each should listen to what the other has to say and try to appreciate what those events meant to their partner. A few minutes of mere chatting can strengthen a relationship almost as much as a trip to Hawaii.

We never fully get someone else's meaning. I surely don't understand how you feel about the flowers you planted. You probably don't understand how I feel about my boss. But it builds the relationship when we listen and try to understand what the other person is feeling. We can ask questions. We can listen carefully. We can describe what we think our partner is feeling.

Some things don't need to be said. It may be completely true that your partner has a funny nose or thinning hair. But talking about it may only hurt feelings. Wise communication requires that some things simply don't get said. Some things don't even need to be thought about.

Talks about difficult issues should be conducted when both parties are feeling good. When a couple tries to tackle their most difficult issues at a time when one or both are tired and angry, the result is almost certain to be destructive. A discussion can turn into a battle. Sharing a cheerful request is more likely to build the relationship - and get a positive response - than making an angry accusation.

We can find ways to **make problem-solving more productive**. John Gottman, a leading researcher on marriage suggests that women find gentle ways to start a conversation. Rather than: "THERE ARE SOME THINGS WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT," she can say, "I am trying to find good ways to make our family run more smoothly. Can I share some ideas with you and get your thoughts?" Gottman also suggests that men learn how to stay involved and stay calm in conversations. Men's heart rates tend to skyrocket when they think they are being attacked by

their partners. Knowing that, they can learn to stay calm and listen carefully to their partner's concerns and ideas. They can learn self-soothing techniques such as deep breathing and calming thoughts.

Communication can keep people in touch with each other and strengthen their relationships when used with wisdom and kindness.

Applications:

What can you do to make an end-of-the-day chat ritual? What is the best time - riding home from work, while cooking, after dinner, later in the evening? How can you make it comfortable for both people? A partner who loves to be busy may want to chop vegetables while talking. A partner who is physically exhausted may want to lie down while talking. Work together to build a talk-time ritual that strengthens your relationship.

Are there some things you say or do that regularly irritate your partner? Maybe you make jokes about her at parties. Maybe you tease him about his baldness. If you know that it makes your partner unhappy, decide not to do it any more.

For all couples there are some things that continue to irritate. Consider whether there are things that bother you that you can choose to ignore.

One of the most important parts of communication is the effort to understand the other's point of view. Whether the subject is happy or contentious, it can be very helpful to try to understand what the other person is feeling. Appropriately using the following phrases can help:

"It sounds like you feel lonely."

"You are very tired of the situation?"

"I guess you feel discouraged."

"Are you worn out?"

"Do you feel like you are doing it all alone?"

When we try to understand someone else's feelings, our listening helps that person make sense of his or her experience and helps that person find better answers even when we give no advice. It also can help us better understand the other person.

Sometimes when we are hurt, we express only anger. Are there disappointments or pains you want to express besides anger?

What is the effect of each of the following statements:

"You are so busy you never have time for anyone. I am sick of it!"

"When you get very involved in so many things, we have less time together. I miss having time with you. I guess I feel lonely."

Recommended reading:

John Gottman has written two excellent books on marriage: "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail," and "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work." Both books provide keen insights into the challenges and blessings of marriage and couple relationships.