

Understanding Your Partner's Point of View

Objective: To identify empathic ways to show your partner that you understand his or her point of view.

You Should Know

It would be impossible to expect that you and your partner will always agree on everything. In fact, it's normal to have different opinions and reactions to events and experiences in your life. This can be a wonderful, lively part of a healthy relationship—sharing one's point of view and learning about another's.

However, sometimes couples argue about who's right or wrong, as if there is only one way of approaching a problem or issue. If you're the type of person who gets defensive or critical or always has to "be right," hearing and understanding your partner's different point of view can be challenging. You don't have to *agree* with everything your partner says or believes, but it would be helpful to learn some new skills for listening without judgment and letting your partner know you hear her or him. If you grew up in a home where everyone frequently argued and no one seemed to listen to one another you might be prone thinking you always have to be right in your relationship. But it's not too late to learn a healthier way to communicate, and if you can do this, your relationship can grow and thrive as a result.

What to Do

This worksheet can help you develop empathy and understanding in your relationship. Here are some tips for improving your listening skills. Practice them next time you notice that you and your partner are having a disagreement. Then record your experiences and reflections.

Practice active listening. This means that you consciously try to hear not just the words your partner is saying but the underlying meaning or message that they might be trying to convey. Active listening has several components:

- Pay full attention to your partner, with no distractions. Make direct eye contact.
- As you listen, don't also formulate what you would like to say back. (If that is challenging, some experts advise repeating the words you're hearing inside your mind, to help you focus.)
- Do not interrupt. This might take a while to learn, but keep at it. Take a deep breath instead.
- Show your partner that you're listening through nods or smiles or saying "mhmm." Unfold your arms or open up your body posture to be more physically open to them.
- Reflect aloud on what you're hearing. Reflecting in this way is like holding up a mirror to your partner in the moment. For example, "What I hear you saying is...", or "It sounds like you're saying..." If you're not clear about what to reflect, you might say, "Can you

say that again?” or “I’m not sure I’m understanding you exactly, is this what you mean...?”

Learn to respond nondefensively. Noticing what comes up for you is an important step toward responding to your partner more positively and effectively. Are you wanting to share a different viewpoint? Can you hold your own viewpoint *and* your partner’s view at the same time? This will help you as you express yourself in response to your partner.

- It’s OK to share your honest opinions, but your partner will be more likely to “hear” you and feel “heard” if you do so with compassion and respect.
- Use “I” statements, not “You” statements. Rather than, “You should pay more attention to me,” try saying, “I’d really like to spend more time with you and be connected.”
- Avoid generalizing to other situations. This comes up most often with the words “always” and “never,” as in, “You always leave your clothes on the floor,” or “You never help me around the house.” Ask yourself, is this actually true? Flip this around to an “I” statement, as in, “I feel irritated when I’ve asked you to help me with the dishes. What can we do to divide the chores more fairly?”
- Give your partner positive feedback for expressing his or her point of view: “Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me,” “I’m so glad to know how you feel about this,” “It helps me to know that you feel differently about this, so I can work to understand you better.”

Invest time and effort in building positive, empathic communication. Most people have busy lives and find it hard to sit down together to listen, talk, share deeply, or resolve conflicts. Too many couples get into major arguments via text messaging, where tone and intent can easily be misunderstood.

- Make a “date” with your partner to meet and talk in person at a mutually convenient time. This may take some juggling at first, but it will be worth it.
- Agree to set strict limits on texting about a thorny issue. Defer disagreements until you are together, in person, with no (or minimal) distractions.
- Try not to work things out right before bedtime, when you might be emotionally tired.
- Let your partner know you want to work hard to build more positive communication. Just hearing that you are motivated to change can be meaningful to him or her.

In the next week or two, notice your communications and keep a log of them in the chart below.

| Event or Situation/Conflict | What Happened? | What Skill or Strategy Did You Practice? |
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More to Think About

1. It is normal for old, habitual ways of communicating to come up when learning new skills. Write below a situation this week in which you noticed that you became defensive or did not listen openly and caringly to your partner's point of view.

2. What could you have done or said differently to be more open to their point of view? Be specific.

3. What would you like to tell your partner about your wish to communicate more positively as a couple? Be specific.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
