

Identifying and Solving Problems in Communication

Objective

To identify problems you are having communicating with your partner in order to strengthen your relationship.

You Should Know

Problems with communication have a significant negative effect on relationship satisfaction, and it is one of the most frequent and damaging relationship difficulties. Poor communication is often why couples seek help from therapists. Research done at the Gottman Institute identified the following poor communication behaviors:

- Complaining
- Blaming
- Frequently using sarcasm
- Stonewalling (detached, cold, distant, or indifferent)
- Criticizing
- Being judgmental
- Mocking or belittling
- Being overly defensive

When you avoid poor communication behaviors, and you express yourself to your partner in constructive and healthy ways, it deepens your connection and strengthens the relationship. Each of you will feel understood, and when problems arise, your connection will remain strong.

Good communication does not have to involve agreement. You and your partner can respectfully agree to disagree, understanding where the other person is coming from. Good communication promotes better understanding, acceptance, and collaboration – instead of constant disagreement and conflict. Good communication involves three important steps:

1. **Listen carefully.** Have a respectful, curious, and open attitude while demonstrating empathy.
2. **Reflect.** Think about what your partner is saying to you and summarize as required.
3. **Respond.** Mindfully agree, disagree, apologize, or assert yourself.

It is particularly important during conflict or times of stress that you and your partner slow down and really listen. Quickly responding to assumed (rather than actual) messages leads to ineffective and unhelpful communication – often escalating conflict. This worksheet will help you identify problems you are having communicating with your partner to establish good communication habits.

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet to give to your partner so each of you can identify problems in communicating with each other. Rate each communication problem from 1 to 10, where 1 = this is not a problem in our relationship, to 10 = this is a major problem in our relationship.

My partner:

- _____ criticizes me frequently.
- _____ finds fault with everything I do.
- _____ offers advice when I don't ask for it (instead of listening to what I have to say).
- _____ doesn't listen to me.
- _____ tends to talk too much.
- _____ frequently yells or screams.
- _____ avoids conflict.
- _____ interrupts.
- _____ apologizes too much.
- _____ often says "you always" or "you never."
- _____ constantly nags.
- _____ has to have the last word.
- _____ gives me the "silent treatment."
- _____ insists that he/she is always "right."
- _____ shows very little interest.
- _____ assumes or "jumps to conclusions."
- _____ enjoys arguing or debating.
- _____ brings up issues at the "wrong" time (when one of you is stressed, tired, or hungry).

Add up your score: _____

If you scored between 18-70, you might have slight problems in communication.

If you scored between 71-130, you have moderate problems with communication.

If you score more than 131 points, there are several problems in communication to address.

Now that you are aware of the communication problems in your relationship, share your worksheet with your partner and complete the following exercise. In this exercise, you and your partner will schedule a 15-30 minute "chat" with each other twice per week for one month. During your time together, eliminate all distractions and focus on each other. You might begin with "safer" conversations before moving onto more controversial topics. Note the date and

time, the topic discussed, and rate each chat from 1 to 10, where 1 = it really didn't go well, to 10 = it deepened our connection. Note you and your partner's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during each chat.

Date/Time	Topic	How Did It Go?	Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviors

Consider the following tips for good communication:

Speaker

- Be specific
- Be brief
- Be as positive as possible
- Use “I” statements
- Be clear about what is helpful
- Avoid “you” statements
- Avoid blame, insults, accusations
- Avoid labels or absolute statements

Listener

- Listen attentively without interrupting
- Reflect on what your partner is saying or feeling
- Summarize what you think was said
- Ask for additional information, if needed
- No counterattacks or defensiveness
- Clarify without excusing
- Find points of agreement
- Apologize or express regret, if applicable

Reflections on This Exercise

Was this exercise helpful in strengthening your relationship through good communication? Explain.

Did you find the communication tips helpful when practicing this exercise? Why or why not?

Was there anything that surprised you during this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
