

Respectful Communication

Follow these basic guidelines in communicating to greatly reduce feelings of hurt and anger. When ideas are shared in a respectful manner, others can listen and receive what is being said more accurately. Communication needs to be as “clean” as possible, not muddled by negative emotions and punitive verbal weapons.

Avoid judgmental words and loaded terms. These are the words that tell your partner they are flawed. They are said to attack and undermine. Some examples of these are: You gave a *total lack* of effort...your *childish* behavior...you are *uncooperative*...that *self-involved style of yours*...your *helpless act*...your *poor me* attitude...you are *thoughtless* as usual... what you say is *a total crock*...

Avoid global labels. Global here means generalized—all or nothing, usually of your partner’s character or identity. Example: He is “stupid, sexist, crazy, selfish, lazy, useless, evil, a bitch or an asshole.” The attack is not on the person’s behavior but on his/her person or identity. These labels convey to the partner that she or he is bad, always in some way, bad. The deliverer of such labels may feel justified at the moment, but the result is always damaging. Trust and closeness are lost. *Separate person from act.*

Avoid “you” messages of blame and accusation. The idea here is to blame the partner for your negative feelings. Instead of saying “you” did this or that, say “I” feel scared...when you get home so late. Some examples of “you” messages: “You’re never on time...you never go anywhere with me... you leave me all the work... you never ask what I want...you’re a lot more interested in your work than in me.” What you are saying with “you” messages is: I’m in pain, and you did it to me. Added to this is: “You were bad and wrong for doing it to me.” Compare these “you” messages with the better “I” messages.

“You” message: You’re always spoiling our evening by being late.

“I” message: When you come home late I feel sad about missing the evening with you.

“You” message: You’re never here when there’s work to be done.

“I” message: I feel tired and irritated when I have to put away the groceries by myself,
when I come home.

Notice when using I messages there is no blaming or cause and effect accusations aimed at the partner

Avoid old history. In communicating well you stick with the issue at hand. Bringing up negative things from the past cloud the issues and can be hurtful. Usually referencing the past is an attempt to build a case against your partner. You try to back up what you’re saying with evidence from the past. You are also trying to underscore the seriousness of his/her fault. Sometimes talking about the past can be informative in seeing patterns of behavior, but when the past is brought up in anger it will be used like a club rather than an instrument to shed light on an issue.

Avoid negative comparisons. Respectful communication never makes your partner feel bad about him/herself. It is designed to help, not hurt; to resolve, not reject. Negative comparisons never resolve anything. Their sole function is to punish and attack, to “show-up” the person and make him/her feel less of a person.

Avoid threats. Threats are deliberate attempts to hurt your partner. You are telling him or her that he or she is bad in some way and he/she will be punished by you. “If you can’t tell me I’m beautiful, I know other men who will”. “If you can’t make more money, I’ll have to leave the kids in daycare and get a job.” The “you don’t measure up” message is painful, but the deliberate intention to hurt is very destructive to the relationship.

Describe your feelings instead of using them to *attack*. When describing your feelings, use words that clarify and help you to be understood. “I’m sad and tearful...I feel a yearning to be closer...I’m feeling rather hurt and withdrawn...I’m stunned and embarrassed.” Notice that the *description* directly identifies the *emotion*. When you are in an attacking mode, you

use your *affect* (the way you look, act, sound) as a weapon. Your voice gets louder, sharper, threatening, hostile, sarcastic, or whiney. To communicate with respect and clarity, you keep your voice as close to a normal volume and inflection as you can. The result is that your partner can better hear what you're feeling without being overwhelmed or bludgeoned by it.

Keep body language open and receptive. Your body posture will tell your partner if you are ready to communicate or not. A tight face, squinting eyes, crossed arms will tell your partner you are not ready to listen. Instead, keep eye contact, nod while you listen, lean slightly forward if sitting and keep your facial expression relaxed.

Use whole messages. Whole messages consist of observations, thoughts, feelings and needs or wants.

Observations are statements of fact, they are neutral, and non-judging. "Yesterday it rained the entire day...Chemistry class is tomorrow...I'm going to ask Sandy what she is wearing to the party tonight."

Thoughts are your beliefs, opinions, theories, and interpretations of a situation. Thoughts should not be conveyed as truths, but as your ideas or hypotheses, or understanding of something. "My idea was... I wondered if ... I've suspected that... I worried that... The way I saw it was..." Saying something like, "You're spending too much time at work" is not an appropriate way to express thoughts in a whole message. Your opinion becomes "the truth". Instead say, "My feeling is that things are out of balance, you need to spend more time at home." This way the speaker takes responsibility for her opinion and does not try to make what she says, the way it has to be.

Feelings in a whole message are usually the most important part. Feelings are simple descriptions of your emotional state. Feelings do not blame or accuse.

Needs must be expressed clearly. Your partner cannot know what you need unless you tell him/her. You might say, “I need a break tonight, would you get up with the baby?...Let me have 15 minutes to sit in front of the TV after work, then I’ll help you with dinner.”

Whole messages communicate clearly and completely. Leaving out one of the four parts makes the message a partial one. In everyday communicating with the grocer or the mechanic, there is not the need to communicate emotions, feelings and personal needs. However, when talking to your partner about things that involve personal matters and feelings, it is important to cover all the bases in a communication—observations, thoughts, feelings and needs. Often there is a lot at stake in communicating with your loved ones. Make the communication whole messages for better understanding.

Use clear messages. You could pretend to make an observation by saying “You certainly are talkative tonight” in a sarcastic tone, meaning you aren’t talking much at all. Actually you are judging your partners behavior in a negative way. Instead say, “I notice you’re pretty quiet tonight (observation). It makes me think you are mad at me (thought), and I feel hurt and a little angry (feelings). I’d really like you to talk with me more (need). This way the message is clear. The first way the message is contaminated by mixed messages and it is disguised. Here is a good example of a clear whole message: “You tend to leave your clothes on the floor when you get undressed (observation). It makes me think that you want me to pick them up (thoughts). And I end up feeling taken for granted and unappreciated (feeling). I’d like to talk about our expectations with respect to housework (need).”

McKay, M., Fanning, P., Paleg, K. (1994). *Couple skills*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.