

Couple Communication 101

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Well, you've made it through the winter holidays and have arrived in the New Year, complete with individual goals and hopes. As you continue your journey into 2009, heading towards the flowers and chocolates in February, it's a great time to focus on better communication with your partner.

Below are some relationship Ps and Qs you can mind to improve your communication etiquette and, hopefully, to foster an atmosphere where you and your partner can both listen to and hear each other.

Most of the suggestions emerge from decades of research by Drs. John and Julie Gottman on the "masters" and "disasters" of long-term committed relationships.

#1. Avoid the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and instead practice their antidotes.

Observing the regular and frequent occurrence of the "Four Horsemen" allows Gottman researchers to predict the demise of a relationship with 94% accuracy. Learn to recognize – and avoid – the horsemen and to replace them with their antidotes!

Avoid the Horsemen

- a. *Criticism* – attacking your partner's personality ("you always" "you never")
- b. *Defensiveness* – taking role of victim (cross-complaining, making excuses, yes-butting)
- c. *Contempt* - attacking your partner's sense of self to hurt her/him (name calling, insults, hostile humor or sarcasm, eye rolling)
- d. *Stonewalling* – withdrawing from the conversation completely (monosyllabic responses, cold silence, leaving the room physically or emotionally)

Practice the Antidotes

- a. *Complain without blaming and make clear requests* – when x happens, I feel y; I would like z
- b. *Accept some part of the responsibility* – it's true that I did x; what can I do about it?
- c. *Foster a culture of appreciation and respect* – demonstrate fondness and express appreciation frequently (Do small things often!)
- d. *Learn to take time outs and to self-soothe* – ask for a time out when overwhelmed, take 20 minutes to calm down, and return to the conversation to resume it if possible

#2. Use a "soft startup" rather than a "harsh startup" to raise difficult issues.

Arguments first "start up" because a spouse sometimes escalates the conflict from the get-go by making a critical or contemptuous remark in a confrontational tone. Bring up problems gently and without blame. Ask whether it's a good time to have a conversation. Express your complaint or request clearly and succinctly, using "I" language and stating your own feelings rather than attacking your partner.

#3. Learn to accept influence from your partner.

Heterosexual marriages succeed to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife. An example from Gottman: “If a woman says, ‘Do you have to work Thursday night? My mother is coming that weekend, and I need your help getting ready,’ and her husband replies, ‘My plans are set, and I’m not changing them,’ this guy is in a shaky marriage. A husband’s ability to be influenced by his wife (rather than vice-versa) is crucial because research shows women are already well practiced at accepting influence from men, and a true partnership only occurs when a husband can do so as well.” In all relationships it is important for each partner to be able to accept influence from the other.

#4. Learn to repair and exit arguments.

All couples have arguments. Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Successful repair attempts include: changing the topic to something completely unrelated; using humor; stroking your partner with a caring remark (“I understand this is hard for you”); making it clear you’re on common ground (“This is our problem”); backing down (in marriage, as in the martial art Aikido, you have to yield to win); and, in general, offering signs of appreciation for your partner and his or her feelings along the way (“I really appreciate and want to thank you for...”). If an argument gets too heated, take a 20-minute break, and agree to approach the topic again when you are both calm (a “time-out”).

#5. Foster a positive atmosphere and deepen your friendship.

Successful relationships have an atmosphere that is generally positive, wherein each partner can give the other “the benefit of the doubt” and “generously interpret” offhand comments. This is the opposite of having a chip on one’s shoulder where one interprets everything personally or negatively. To achieve and sustain a positive atmosphere: *focus on your friendship* (talk to each other, know what’s happening in your partner’s life and who the major players are); *express fondness and admiration* frequently through affection, small gestures, kind words, and voiced appreciation; practice *turning towards your partner* rather than turning away; and sustain a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions – *during arguments* (25:1 during non-conflict).

#6. Accept what you can and ask to change what you can’t accept.

If you can freely make a sacrifice or accept something within the relationship, that’s great. However, if you feel twinges of resentment, that’s your cue to voice your need or request for you and/or your partner to change something.

Fact: 31% of couple’s problems are resolvable – leaving a whopping 69% that are not.

So, to survive – and remain happy – in your relationship, you will need to learn to accept over two-thirds of the issues between you – and work to resolve what you can. Every couple has its own unique set of problems. Couples that remain together – and happy – make a habit of these basic tips.

Recommended reading: *The Seven Principles for a Successful Marriage* (John Gottman and Jan Silver) and *New Rules for Marriage* (Terrence Real)