



Communication Guide for Couples

From Disconnection to Connection

- Do you sometimes find that it can be really difficult to explain to your partner how you feel, without things escalating into an argument?
- Maybe you try to explain how you feel, but it always seems to come out in the wrong way, leaving you feeling frustrated and your partner upset or angry, leaving you feeling unheard?
- Perhaps you don't have the confidence to be completely honest with your partner, for fear that you will upset them or make them angry, and so hold back and bottle your feelings up until you finally crack and erupt?
- Or maybe you find that you and your partner withdraw from each-other completely following an argument or disagreement, in a kind of stand-off, each of you waiting for the other one to break the silence first?

Ironically, when you bottle things up until you can't hold back any longer, things tend to come out in a negative tone at best, to insulting at worst, so you probably find that you both end up upset and angry anyway!

What if communicating with your partner felt easy, as though it flowed like a river, reaching the right destination together? Or more like a gentle breeze rather than a tornado of destruction?

What if you were to try a new way of communicating, where you were able to say exactly how you feel without your partner becoming defensive?

So that you felt heard.

So that you felt that your feelings mattered to your partner.

Taking the time to really think about what you want to say, and how you are going to say it, before you say it, can make a huge difference to the outcome.

When you shift your thinking from “complaining” to “giving feedback”, offering your feelings to your partner can become a gift, because you are giving them information that lets them get to know you a little more.

Feedback is giving information to your partner on how their behaviour is affecting you. The information that you offer may be thankful, enlightening, challenging, or contentious. Whatever the nature of the feedback, by not holding back from them you are instead letting them in. But your feedback has to be sensitive and respectful in order for your partner to receive it well.

By following the guidelines below, you can start to think about communication as a means of connection, rather than disconnection:-

- 1) **Motivation** - before giving feedback, ask yourself what your motivation for giving feedback is. Will it enhance the relationship? Or do you just feel like offloading, with no real purpose or outcome in mind?
- 2) **Ask** - first check that your partner is open to receiving feedback. They have the right to decline feedback, and mutual respect for each-other’s boundaries is important. An example of how you might approach this is as follows:-

You: “[Name], there is something I would like to discuss with you. Is now a good time?”

Your partner will either agree to talk, or not. If the timing isn’t right for them, or they say that they aren’t in the right frame of mind, do respect their wishes. However, ask them to suggest an alternative time to come back to the issue and explain that it is important to you to do so.

- 3) **Timing is also important** - try not to initiate a discussion of something potentially difficult if you are both tired, stressed or in a rush to leave for work/the school run/the dentist.

This is particularly important as often, complaints have a way of coming out at exactly these times, as they are often triggered in these situations.

- 4) **Be specific about what is bothering you** - this is more helpful to the person receiving the feedback, particularly if they are being asked to change a behaviour. This sends a clearer message than if using a general statement.
- 5) **Avoid using “globalisations”** – for example:-

“You always...”, “You never...”

These types of statement are rarely accurate, and your partner will always find a time when they “didn’t” or “did”. They are also likely to feel accused, leading them to defend themselves, and retaliate in response. For example:-

You: “You never take the bins out, you always leave it up to me”

Your Partner: “That’s not true, I took the bins out 2 weeks ago, and anyway, you never wash up after yourself and always leave me to do it”

Before you know it, you have ended up in a debate about something else, and the main reason for your feedback gets lost and is left unresolved.

- 6) **Focus on how you feel** - feelings are important as these are what lead us to giving feedback in the first place. When describing your feelings use “I” statements. ‘I’ statements and messages are more effective because they place responsibility where it belongs, with the giver. ‘I’ statements are easier for the receiver to hear. Feelings are individual and personal so cannot be disagreed with or denied by your partner.

Which of these two pieces of feedback do you think your partner would prefer to hear from you?:-

“You’ve made me really angry by making plans without asking me first and just assuming I would go along with it. I’m obviously not important enough to you.”

Or:-

“I noticed from the calendar that you made arrangements for us to see your parents next weekend, although it’s something we hadn’t discussed together. When I realised this, I felt hurt and angry, and wondered why you didn’t check with me first. I assumed that you didn’t think it was important to ask me first. Is that right?”

The second statement is easier to hear as it's not accusatory, is factual and specific, is a lot more open as it allows for the possibility for your partner to respond and correct any assumptions you may have made. And crucially, you take responsibility for your own feelings, rather than telling your partner that they "made" you feel that way.

And finally.....

- 7) **Ask for what you want instead** - without a request for change, your partner may feel criticised, or "nagged", or unsure what it is that you want. It also gives a reason for giving the feedback in the first place, and means that you have an opportunity to solve the issue. For example:-

"I noticed from the calendar that you made arrangements for us to see your parents next weekend, although it's something we hadn't discussed together. When I realised this, I felt hurt and angry, and wondered why you didn't check with me first. I assumed that you didn't think it was important to ask me first. Is that right? I would prefer it if, next time when your parents call and ask to make arrangements, that you let them know that you will need to check with me first, in case I have any plans myself. Is that OK?"

For further, professional help with the communication in your relationship, contact Local Counselling Centre on 01462 674671 to connect with a fully qualified Couples Therapist.

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