

COMMUNICATION THAT CURES PROBLEMS

Opposites attract and likes repel. When a couple cannot accommodate their “attractive differences” and tries to act as one person, the second half of magnetic law is set into action. A widening gulf develops as partners start to repel each other and differences become extreme. The first step to bridging this chasm is to become aware of the communication patterns that feed it. You can start by identifying what your partner does that bothers you. However, immediately examine how you react. For example, if your partner is sloppy, have you become the critic? If your partner is critical, do you find yourself on the defensive or withdrawing? Whenever a problem occurs, the variety of responses to it is endless. Yet, most people get stuck in “fight” or “flight” reactions.

Directions: Do you use automatic defend-withdraw-attack communication patterns that are oriented toward winning and losing, or learned responses that offer a way to resolve problems by which both parties win? Mark habit reactions on the left or thoughtful responses on the right that are typical for you.

Change Habit Reactions

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into Thoughtful Responses

Instead of defending or withdrawing:

- Apologizing: “I’m sorry I . . .”
- Reassuring: “I really do . . .”
- Explaining: “The reason is . . .”
- Justifying: “I was just . . .”
- Tuning out

Use active listening:¹

- Clarify/rephrase: “What do you mean by . . . ?” “Are you saying . . . ?”
- Label feelings: “You must feel . . .” “You seem . . .”
- Validate feelings: “It makes sense that . . .” “It must be hard when . . .”

Instead of controlling:

- Convincing: “You have to understand . . .”
- Disagreeing: “You’re wrong about . . .”
- Advising/lecturing: “Why don’t you . . . ?”
- Ordering: “You have to . . .”
- Threatening: “. . . or else”

Use effective expression:²

- State your feelings: “I feel . . . when you . . .”
- Make requests: “Would you . . . ?”
- Set limits: “I’m willing/not willing to . . .”

Instead of condemning:

- Complaining: “You don’t . . .” “Nothing ever . . .”
- Blaming: “You never . . .”
- Criticizing: “You should/shouldn’t . . .”
- Comparing: “Why can’t you be more like . . .”
- Predicting the worst: “You’ll never . . .”
- Accusing: “I know you’re . . .”
- Insulting, name-calling, making slurs
- Taunting, teasing, rejecting
- Using sarcastic, mocking, patronizing tones

Use deflecting and defusing:³

- Turn killer words into kindness: Agree in fact or theory, take or give compliments; find golden nuggets, dramatize, twist the tone; use reverse psychology.
- Understand causes and effects of intimidation; label feelings, sympathize, ask questions; express feelings, wants, and limits.
- Use “power words”: try, dare, but; unrelated comments and general humor.

¹ See *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix (Henry Holt, 1988).

² See *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray (HarperCollins, 1992).

³ See *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies* by Kate Cohen-Posey (Rainbow Books, 1995).

The most important learned communication response to use when either you or your partner is upset is to *show* understanding. The word “show” is emphasized because it does not help to understand unless you demonstrate your understanding by rephrasing thoughts, labeling feelings, and validating factors that contribute to emotions. Using all three active listening responses can produce powerful results.

ADVANTAGES OF FIRST SHOWING UNDERSTANDING

Many people have fears that they will never be understood, resolve their feelings, and have their needs met unless they talk. When the art of listening is understood, it makes sense why the opposite is true:

- You can reduce the intensity of your own reactions by understanding the hurt that underlies your partner’s undesirable behavior. Always assume that when your partner does not treat you well, there is an old resentment or fear behind that behavior.
- Your partner will have less need to defend, withdraw, attack, or give long-winded speeches: It may take several statements of understanding before your partner realizes that you simply want to understand without trying to force changes.
- The best way to obtain understanding is by giving it: As your partner’s defenses come down, he or she will want to understand how things have been for you. Your persistent efforts to show understanding will serve as a model that can teach your partner to rephrase, identify feelings, validate, and sympathize. You can aid the process (after you thoroughly understand your partner’s feelings) by asking, “Would you like to understand why I acted the way I did?”
- Long-lasting solutions come from understanding: They are never reached by convincing, ordering, threatening, and nagging. Over time, deep levels of understanding will develop and conflicts will begin to resolve themselves.
- You and your partner will begin to encourage the best in each other by appreciating good intentions in difficult behavior: “I imagine you think I get the credit I deserve when I’m all fixed up and you must be puzzled when I don’t mind not being noticed.”

Showing approval and appreciation of the little things your partner does to meet your needs goes one step beyond understanding and promotes continued success. When you find things to criticize, you ensure disaster. You can even appreciate things that have not happened as though they have, and start a desired change: “I’ve noticed how you’ve begun to pick things up around the house more. That really helps me relax.”

Understanding the pain that underlies troublesome behavior and noticing the little things a person does to change is simple, but it’s not easy. It can be extremely difficult to put your own need for understanding aside to focus on your partner. However, once you are freed of the need to attack, defend, and withdraw, the rigid divisions in the relationship will begin to fall apart. Your mind will open to a vast array of tactics that can change the way you and your partner deal with problems.⁴

⁴ See *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman (Crown Publishers, 1999) for more information on the dangers of attacking, defending, and withdrawing.