

## Why Couples Need to Communicate Effectively

Communication is the exchange of messages between people. It is talking but also listening. It is not only verbal but non-verbal and both can be powerful ways to express ourselves.

Communication allows couples to understand each other's feelings, needs and expectations. It provides a way to feel close during the daily ups and downs of living together.

Communication is vital in a relationship! Couples who have strong, enduring relationships list effective communication as a major satisfaction. On the other hand, couples whose relationship is in distress identify poor communication as a major problem area.



## Using “I” Statements vs. “You” Statements

“I” and “You” are small words that make a big difference.

“I” statements express our own feelings, thoughts, perceptions or wants. “I” statements use self-disclosure, opening the door for understanding through honest and direct statements of feelings or wants. For example, “I felt embarrassed when you talked about my weight in front of my friends.”

“You” statements try to direct or control what is happening. “You” statements frequently come across as blaming, nagging, or attacking; for example “You always...”, “You never...” or “Why did you...?” “You” statements provoke defensiveness and may generate a counterattack.

## Listening to Understand

Listening is hard work. Typically we half-listen, preoccupied with other thoughts or preparing a response before our partner has finished speaking.

Creative communication requires that we listen carefully, putting aside our own agenda while trying to identify with the thoughts and feelings of our partner. It is listening to understand – listening with empathy.

## Feedback



Feedback is a way to check that the message the listener heard is the message the talker intended. For example, the listener might say:

- “I heard you say...  
or
- “Is that correct?”  
or
- “Are you saying that...?”  
or
- “I’m not sure I understand what you are saying.”

Then the talker can confirm, correct or clarify the message.

In creative communication, feedback and clarification can become quick and useful ways to prevent and clear up needless misunderstandings. This is especially valuable when emotions are high.

## How We Communicate

We communicate verbally and non-verbally. Words are important but words carry only part of the message. All behavior communicates. We communicate even when we are silent! We communicate by action and also by non-action.

- **Gestures:** An outstretched hand can be an invitation to touch or it can push your partner away.
- **Posture:** Leaning towards your partner can send a message of interest. Turning away may be regarded as indifference or rejection.
- **Eye Contact:** Direct eye contact may be viewed as concern, respect, honesty. Avoiding eye contact may be interpreted as lack of interest or dishonesty.
- **Facial expression, touch, tone of voice and attentiveness** also send non-verbal messages.

Creative Communication begins with being aware of what is going on inside yourself, letting your partner know you, being able to listen to understand and effectively using feedback, “I messages” and clarification.

## Exercise: Listening to Understand You

Identify a topic that is important to you, but not a “hot” issue. Take turns being the talker and listener. To begin, decide who will talk first.

**Role of talker:** Make “I” statements about the topic – one or two statements about your thoughts and feelings. Avoid “You” statements.

**Role of listener:** Temporarily, try to put aside your own agenda. Use all your energy for listening. As you listen, try to identify what your partner is thinking, feeling and trying to express.

After your partner speaks, offer feedback, acknowledging the thoughts and feelings you heard. Use “I” statements such as “I heard...” or ask for clarification “Is this what you meant?”. Then let your partner clarify.

When your partner is satisfied that you heard the message accurately, switch roles and repeat this process

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## CREATIVE COMMUNICATION



Why won't you talk to me? You never listen to what I saw. That's not what I meant!

Do these statements sound familiar? Have you used any one of them yourself?

Communication in relationships can sometimes be difficult. Why? Because we have each learned how to communicate long before we met our partner.

The good news is: behavior that is learned can be changed or “unlearned”. Couples can learn new skills and modify old patterns in creative ways so that their relationship becomes stronger and more mutually satisfying.