

9 Steps to Better Communication Today

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Relationships don't exist in a vacuum. They exist between two emotional human beings who bring their own past experiences, history, and expectations into it. Two different people also have different levels of skill when it comes to communication. But better communication, because it is a skill, can also be learned.

The most popular myth about communication in relationships is that since you talk to your partner, you're automatically *communicating*. While talking to your partner is indeed a form of communication, if it's primarily about everyday, "surfacey" topics ("How were the kids?" "How was work?" "How's your mother?"), you're not really communicating about the important stuff. This article is primarily about how to talk in a more open and rewarding manner with your significant other.

Communication either makes or breaks most relationships. You can improve your relationship today, right now, by putting into practice some of these tips for improving the communication in your relationship.

1. Stop and listen.

How many times have you heard someone say this or read this in an article about communication skills? How hard is it to actually do when you're "in the moment?" Harder than it sounds. When we're knee deep within a serious discussion or argument with our significant other, it's hard to put aside our point for the moment and just listen. We're often so afraid of not being heard, we rush to keep talking. Ironically, such behavior makes it all the more likely we won't be heard.

2. Force yourself to hear.

You've stopped talking for the moment, but your head is still swirling with all of the things **you** want to say, so you're still not really hearing what is being said. Laugh all you want, but therapists have a technique that works very well that "forces" them to really hear what a client tells them — rephrasing what a person has just said to them (called "reflection").

This may upset a partner if you do it too much, or do it in a tone that suggests you're mocking rather than trying to seriously listen. So use the technique sparingly, and let your partner know why you're doing it if they ask — "Sometimes I don't think I'm getting what you're telling me, and doing this lets me slow my mind down a bit and really try and hear what you're saying."

3. Be open and honest with your partner.

Some people have never been very open to others in their life. Heck, some people might not even know themselves, or know much about their own real needs and desires. But to be in a relationship is to take a step toward opening up your life and opening up yourself.

Little lies turn into big lies. Hiding your emotions behind a cloak of invincibility might work for you, but won't work for most others. Pretending everything is alright isn't alright. And giving your partner the silent treatment is about as useful as a fish with a bicycle. In the desert. At night. These things may have "worked" for you in the past, but they are all barriers to good communication.

Being open means talking about things you may have never talked about with another human being before in your life. It means being vulnerable and honest with your partner, completely and unabashedly. It means opening yourself up to possible hurt and disappointment. But it also means opening yourself up to the full potential of all a relationship can be.

4. Pay attention to nonverbal signals.

Most of our communication with one another in any friendship or relationship isn't what we say, but *how we say it*. Nonverbal communication is your body language, the tone of your voice, its inflection, eye contact, and how far away you are when you talk to someone else. Learning to communicate better means that you need to learn how to read these signals as well as hear what the other person is saying. Reading your partner's nonverbal signals takes time and patience, but the more you do it, the more attuned you will be to what they're really saying, such as:

- Folded arms in front of a person may mean they're feeling defensive or closed off.
- Lack of eye contact may mean they're not really interested in what you're saying, are ashamed of something, or find it difficult to talk about something.

- Louder, more aggressive tone may mean the person is escalating the discussion and is becoming very emotionally involved. It might also suggest they feel like they're not being heard or understood.
- Someone who's turned away from you when talking to you may mean disinterest or being closed off.

All the while you're reading your partner's nonverbal signals, be aware of your own. Make and maintain eye contact, keep a neutral body stance and tone to your voice, and sit next to the person when you're talking to them.

5. Stay focused in the here and now.

Sometimes discussions turn into arguments, that can then morph into a discussion about everything and the kitchen sink. To be respectful of one another and the relationship, you should try and keep the discussion (or argument) focused to the topic at hand. While it's easy to get in the cheap shots or bring up everything that an argument seems to call for, just don't. If the argument is ostensibly about who's making dinner tonight, keep it that topic. Don't veer off down the country road of who does what in the house, who's responsible for child rearing, and by the way, who cleans the kitchen sink.

Arguments that do veer off tend to escalate and grow larger and larger. One party needs to make an effort at that point to try and de-escalate the argument, even if it means walking away from it, literally. But do so as respectfully as possible, saying something like, "Look, I can see this isn't going to get any better by discussing it tonight. Let's sleep on it and try talking about it with fresh eyes in the morning, okay?"

6. Try to minimize emotion when talking about important, big decisions.

Nobody can talk about important, big matters if they feel emotionally vulnerable or charged-up and angry. Those are not the times to talk about the serious issues (like money, getting married, the kids, or retirement). You might think it impossible, nonsensical or even contradictory to talk about an emotional topic like getting married or having children without emotion. And yet, these discussions need to keep a foothold of rationality to them in order to not gloss over the realities that they bring. Marriage, for instance, brings the combining of households and living with another person day-to-day. Having kids isn't just about cute toddler clothes and painting the

nursery, but talking about who's going to change diapers, feed the newborn, and be available at all hours of the day and night for months on end.

7. Be ready to cede an argument.

How many times do we continue to argue or have a heated discussion because we simply want to be “right.” I've talked about this sense of needing to “win” arguments more than once. Why? Because so many of couples' arguments revolve around one party thinking they're “right” and the other party not willing to cede the point or back off. In fact, though, **both parties need to back off.**

By doing this, are you giving up a piece of yourself by compromising and not insisting on how right you are? Well, that's something only you can decide. Would you rather be in a happy relationship where you respect the other person, even if you may occasionally disagree with them? Or would you rather be in an unhappy relationship where you know you're always right, no matter what? It just comes down to your priorities — if being “right” is more important to you than your partner's happiness, then perhaps you have not found the right partner.

8. Humor and playfulness usually help.

You don't have to be funny in order to use humor and playfulness in everyday conversations. You just need to use the sense of humor you do have and try and inject it into more of your communications with your partner. Humor helps lighten everyday frustrations and helps puts things into perspective more gently than other methods. Playfulness reminds us that even as adults, we all have a side to us that enjoys fun and taking a break from the seriousness of work and other demands made on us.

9. Communicating is more than just talking.

To communicate better and more effectively in your relationship, you don't only have to talk. You can communicate in other ways — through your actions, and nowadays, electronically too (through email, Facebook, blogs, texting or Twitter). All too often, couples focus only on the talking aspect of their relationship, but your actions also speak loudly. Keeping in touch throughout the day or week through email or other electronic means also reminds the person you're thinking about them and how important they are in your life. Even if such communications are mainly playful or inconsequential, they can help lighten your partner's day and improve their mood.

Some couples also find that using email or another method is easier to discuss emotional issues rather than trying to do so face-to-face. It's something to consider if every time you try and bring up a particular topic with your significant other, it turns into an argument or they shy away from it. Email or texting may be a way of communicating about such matters more openly and directly.

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Nobody is a perfect communicator all the time. But you can work to become a *better communicator* by trying a few of these tips. They won't all work, nor will they work all the time. Better communication, however, starts with one person making the effort to improve, which often encourages the other to come along for the ride.