

# Communication Guide

Try to remember that the goal in any relationship is effective communication. Effective communication consists of all individuals feeling heard, seen, validated and understood with empathy and without judgement.

Some key concepts to remember when we are communicating:

- Feelings are not facts
- Feelings are not good or bad
- Feelings are not right or wrong, they are different and that's okay
- ALL feelings are valid
- The goal of conflict is resolution
- In regard to conflict there is no right person or wrong person
- The goal of conflict is to negotiate and come to a compromise that everyone is okay with
- Conflict is productive
- Conflict is not yelling, screaming, or hurtful

1. Be gentle and kind with our words and tone of voice.
  - No attacks
  - No threats
  - Do not judge
  - No smirking
  - No eye rolling
  - No sighing
  - No shrugging
2. Be interested in what others are saying.
  - Maintain eye contact
  - Do not interrupt
3. Validate the other person and the way they feel.
  - Try to understand other perspectives by putting yourself in another's shoes
  - Show empathy for the other's feelings
4. Body language is also important.
  - Try to stay lighthearted and smile

## Communication Rules

- **Before you begin, ask yourself why you feel upset.**

Are you truly angry because your partner left the mustard on the counter? Or are you upset because you feel like you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just one more piece of evidence? Take time to think about your own feelings before starting an argument.

- **Discuss one issue at a time.**

"You shouldn't be spending so much money without talking to me" can quickly turn into "You don't care about our family". Now you need to resolve two problems instead of one. Plus, when an argument starts to get off topic, it can easily become about everything a person has ever done wrong. We've all done a lot wrong, so this can be especially cumbersome.

- **No degrading language.**

Discuss the issue, not the person. No put-downs, swearing, or name-calling. Degrading language is an attempt to express negative feelings while making sure your partner feels just as bad. This will just lead to more character attacks while the original issue is forgotten.

- **Use “I” Statements**

Express your feelings with words and take responsibility for them. “I feel angry.” “I feel hurt when you ignore my phone calls.” “I feel scared when you yell.” These are good ways to express how you feel. Starting with “I” is a good technique to help you take responsibility for your feelings (no, you can’t say whatever you want as long as it starts with “I”).

- **Take turns talking.**

This can be tough, but be careful not to interrupt. If this rule is difficult to follow, try setting a timer allowing 1 minute for each person to speak without interruption. Don’t spend your partner’s minute thinking about what you want to say. Listen to hear, not to reply.

- **No stonewalling.**

Sometimes, the easiest way to respond to an argument is to retreat into your shell and refuse to speak. This refusal to communicate is called stonewalling. You might feel better temporarily, but the original issue will remain unresolved and your partner will feel more upset. If you absolutely cannot go on, tell your partner you need to take a time-out. Agree to resume the discussion later.

- **No yelling.**

Sometimes arguments are “won” by being the loudest, but the problem only gets worse. Take a time-out if things get too heated.

In a perfect world we would all follow these rules 100% of the time, but it just doesn’t work like that. If an argument starts to become personal or heated, take a time-out. Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down.

- **Attempt to come to a compromise or an understanding.**

There isn’t always a perfect answer to an argument. Life is just too messy for that. Do your best to come to a compromise (this will mean some give and take from both sides). If you can’t come to a compromise, merely understanding can help soothe negative feelings.

## “I” Statements

When a person feels that they are being blamed—whether rightly or wrongly—it’s common that they respond with defensiveness. “I” statements are a simple way of speaking that will help you avoid this trap by reducing feelings of blame. A good “I” statement takes responsibility for one’s own feelings, while tactfully describing a problem.

“I feel (emotion word) when (explanation).”

“I feel...” must be followed with an emotion word, such as “angry”, “hurt”, or “worried”. ✓ Careful wording won’t help if your voice still sounds blaming. Use a soft and even tone. ✓ In your explanation, gently describe how the other person’s actions affect you.

### Examples

<b>Blaming</b>	“You can’t keep coming home so late! It’s so inconsiderate.”
<b>“I” Statement</b>	“I feel worried when you come home late. I can’t even sleep.”

<b>Blaming</b>	“You never call me. I guess we just won’t talk anymore.”
<b>“I” Statement</b>	“I feel hurt when you go so long without calling. I’m afraid you don’t care.”

## Practice

Scenario	A friend always cancels plans at the last minute. Recently, you were waiting for them at a restaurant, when they called to say they couldn't make it.
"I" Statement	

Scenario	You are working on a group project, and one member is not completing their portion. You have repeatedly had to finish their work.
"I" Statement	

Scenario	Your boss keeps dumping new work on you, with little instruction, and not enough time. Despite working overtime, you're weeks behind.
"I" Statement	

## Active Listening Communication Skill

**Active Listening:** Treating listening as an active process, rather than a passive one. This means participating in conversation, rather than acting as an audience. Active listeners show they are listening, encourage sharing, and strive to understand the speaker.

**Show You're Listening:** Put away distractions. Watching TV, using your phone, or doing other things while listening sends the message that the speaker's words are not important. Putting away distractions allows you to focus on the conversation and help the speaker feel heard.

**Use verbal and nonverbal communication:** Body language and short verbal cues that match the speaker's affect (e.g. responding excitedly if the speaker is excited) show interest and empathy. Verbal: "mm-hmm" / "uh-huh" "that's interesting" "that makes sense" "I understand" Nonverbal: nodding in agreement reacting to emotional content (e.g. smiling) eye contact

**Encourage Sharing:** Ask open-ended questions. These are questions that encourage elaboration, rather than "yes" or "no" responses. Open-ended questions tell the speaker you are listening, and you want to learn more.

- "What is it like to \_\_\_?"
- "How did you feel when \_\_\_?"
- "Can you tell me more about \_\_\_?"
- "How do you \_\_\_?"
- "What do you like about \_\_\_?"
- "What are your thoughts about \_\_\_?"

**Use reflections:** In your own words, summarize the speaker's most important points. Be sure to include emotional content, even if it was only communicated through tone or body language.

Speaker: I've been having a hard time at work. There's way too much to do and I can't keep up. My boss is frustrated that everything isn't done, but I can't help it.

Listener: It sounds like you're doing your best to keep up, but there's too much work. That sounds stressful!

**Strive to Understand:** Be present. Listening means paying attention to body language, tone, and verbal content. Focus your attention on listening, instead of other mental distractions, such as what you want to say next. When possible, save sensitive conversations for a quiet time with few distractions. Listen with an open mind. Your job is to understand the speaker's point of view, even if you don't agree. Avoid forming opinions and making judgments until you fully understand their perspective.

Using a technique called reflection can quickly help you become a better listener. When reflecting, you will repeat back what someone has just said to you, but in your own words. This shows that you didn't just hear the other person, but you are trying to understand them.

Reflecting what another person says can feel funny at first. You might think the other person will be annoyed at you for repeating them. However, when used correctly, reflections receive a positive reaction and drive a conversation forward. Here's an example:

- Speaker: "I get so angry when you spend so much money without telling me. We're trying to save for a house!"
- Listener: "We're working hard to save for a house, so it's really frustrating when it seems like I don't care."

### Quick Tips

The tone of voice you use for reflections is important. Use a tone that comes across as a statement, with a bit of uncertainty. Your goal is to express: "I think this is what you're telling me, but correct me if I'm wrong." Your reflections don't have to be perfect. If the other person corrects you, that's good! Now you have a better understanding of what they're trying to say.

Try to reflect emotions, even if the person you're listening to didn't clearly describe them. You may be able to pick up on how they feel by their tone of voice or body language.

Switch up your phrasing, or your reflections will start to sound forced. Try some of these: • "I hear you saying that..."

- "It sounds like you feel..."
- "You're telling me that..."

Focus on reflecting the main point. Don't worry too much about all the little details, especially if the speaker had a lot to say.

**Practice:** "I was in a bad mood yesterday because work has been so stressful. I just can't keep up with everything I have to do."

**Reflection:** "I feel like I'm doing all of the work around the house. I need you to help me clean and do the dishes more often."

"I've been worried when you don't answer your phone. I always think something might've happened to you."

"I don't understand what she wants from me. First she says she wants one thing, then another."

## Conflict Resolution

**Focus on the problem, not the person:** When a disagreement turns to personal insults, raised voices, or mocking tones, the conversation is no longer productive. Be careful to focus on the problem without placing blame on your partner. If a disagreement becomes personal, you should pause the conversation.

**Use reflective listening:** Oftentimes during arguments we focus on getting our own point across rather than listening to our partner. Before responding to your partner, restate what they have said to you in your own words. Continue this process until your partner agrees that you understand. Next, share your side. Your partner should reflect back your ideas in their own words until they too understand. Using this technique will help both individuals feel listened to and understood, even if you disagree.

**Use "I" statements:** When sharing a concern, begin your sentence with "I". For example: "I feel hurt when you don't tell me you'll be late". With this sentence format we show that we are taking responsibility for our own emotion rather than blaming our partner. The alternative sentence—"You never tell me when you're going to be late"—will often cause a partner to become defensive.

**Know when to take a time-out:** When you and your partner are becoming argumentative, insulting, or aggressive, it's a good idea to take a time-out. Have a plan in place so you or your partner can call for a break when needed. Spend some time doing something alone that you find relaxing. When you've both calmed down, you and your partner can return to solving the problem. Be sure that you do return—it isn't a good idea to leave these issues unaddressed.

**Work toward a resolution:** Disagreement is a normal part of a relationship. If it becomes clear that you and your partner will not agree, focus on a resolution instead. Try to find a compromise that benefits both individuals. Ask yourself if this disagreement really matters to your relationship, and let yourself move on if not.

## Unhelpful things we do when communicating

### The Four Horsemen

The first step in effectively managing conflict is to identify and counteract The Four Horsemen when they arrive in your conflict discussions. Luckily, for every horseman there is an antidote, and you can learn how and when to use them below.

All relationships, even the most successful ones, have conflict. It is unavoidable. Fortunately, our research shows that it's not the appearance of conflict, but rather how it's managed that predicts the success or failure of a relationship. We say "manage" conflict rather than "resolve," because relationship conflict is natural and has functional, positive aspects that provide opportunities for growth and understanding.

And there are problems that you just won't solve due to natural personality differences between you and your partner, but if you can learn to manage those problems in a healthy way, then your relationship will succeed.

The first step in effectively managing conflict is to identify and counteract The Four Horsemen when they arrive in your conflict discussions. If you don't, you risk serious problems in the future of your relationship. But, like Newton's Third Law, for every horseman there is an antidote, and you can learn how and when to use them below.

1. **Criticism** - Verbally attacking, name calling, putting the other person or their character down
  - o Gentle startup - Use "I" statements, reflective listening, and talk about your feelings.
2. **Contempt** - Attacking the other person's sense of self with the intention of insult or verbal abuse.
  - o Build a culture of appreciation - Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities and find gratitude for positive actions.
3. **Defensiveness** - Victimized yourself of a perceived attack and reversing the blame.
  - o Take responsibility for yourself - Hold yourself for your behavior, accept your partner's perspective, and apologize for your wrongdoing.
4. **Stonewalling** - Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.
  - o Physiological self-soothing - Take a break and spend some time doing something soothing and distracting.

### The Antidotes by Ellie Lisitsa

#### 1. The Antidote to Criticism: Gentle Start-Up

A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, but criticism attacks a person's very character. The antidote

for criticism is to complain without blame by using a soft or gentle start-up. Avoid saying "you," which can indicate blame, and instead talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express what you need in a positive way.

To put it simply, think of these two things to formulate your soft start-up: What do I feel? What do I need?

Example:

- Criticism: "You always talk about yourself. Why are you always so selfish?"
- Antidote: "I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent. Can we please talk about my day?"

Notice that the antidote starts with "I feel," leads into "I need," and then respectfully asks to fulfill that need. There's no blame or criticism, which prevents the discussion from escalating into an argument.

### **The Antidote to Contempt: Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect**

Contempt shows up in statements that come from a position of moral superiority. Some examples of contempt include sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. Contempt is destructive and defeating. It is the greatest predictor of divorce, and it must be avoided at all costs.

The antidote to contempt is to build a culture of appreciation and respect in your relationship, and there are a few ways to do that. One of our mottos is Small Things Often: if you regularly express appreciation, gratitude, affection, and respect for your partner, you'll create a positive perspective in your relationship that acts as a buffer for negative feelings. The more positive you feel, the less likely that you'll feel or express contempt!

Another way that we explain this is our discovery of the 5:1 "magic ratio" of positive to negative interactions that a relationship must have to succeed. If you have five or more positive interactions for every one negative interaction, then you're making regular deposits into your emotional bank account, which keeps your relationship in the green.

Example:

- Contempt: "You forgot to load the dishwasher again? Ugh. You are so incredibly lazy." (Rolls eyes.)
- Antidote: "I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to load the dishwasher when I work late? I'd appreciate it."

The antidote here works so well because it expresses understanding right off the bat. This partner shows how they know that the lack of cleanliness isn't out of laziness or malice, and so they do not make a contemptuous statement about their partner or take any position of moral superiority.

Instead, this antidote is a respectful request, and it ends with a statement of appreciation.

### **The Antidote to Defensiveness: Take Responsibility**

Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem at hand.

Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying that the problem isn't me, it's you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

Example:

- Defensiveness: "It's not my fault that we're going to be late. It's your fault since you always get dressed at the last second."
- Antidote: "I don't like being late, but you're right. We don't always have to leave so early. I can be a little more flexible."

By taking responsibility for part of the conflict (trying to leave too early), even while asserting that they don't like to be late, this partner prevents the conflict from escalating by admitting their role in the conflict. From here, this couple can work towards a compromise.

### The Antidote to Stonewalling: Physiological Self-Soothing

Stonewalling is when someone completely withdraws from a conflict discussion and no longer responds to their partner. It usually happens when you're feeling flooded or emotionally overwhelmed, so your reaction is to shut down, stop talking, and disengage. And when couples stonewall, they're under a lot of emotional pressure, which increases heart rates, releases stress hormones into the bloodstream, and can even trigger a fight-or-flight response.

In one of our longitudinal research studies, we interrupted couples after fifteen minutes of an argument and told them we needed to adjust the equipment. We asked them not to talk about their issue, but just to read magazines for half an hour. When they started talking again, their heart rates were significantly lower and their interaction was more positive and productive.

What happened during that half hour? Each partner, without even knowing it, physiologically soothed themselves by reading and avoiding discussion. They calmed down, and once they felt calm, they were able to return to the discussion in a respectful and rational way.

Therefore, the antidote to stonewalling is to practice physiological self-soothing, and the first step of self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion and call a timeout:

- "Look, we've been through this over and over again. I'm tired of reminding you—"
- "Honey, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm feeling overwhelmed and I need to take a break. Can you give me twenty minutes and then we can talk?"

If you don't take a break, you'll find yourself either stonewalling and bottling up your emotions, or you'll end up exploding at your partner, or both, and neither will get you anywhere good.

So, when you take a break, it should last at least twenty minutes because it will take that long before your body physiologically calms down. It's crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation ("I don't have to take this anymore") and innocent victimhood ("Why is he always picking on me?"). Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music, reading, or exercising. It doesn't really matter what you do, as long as it helps you to calm down.