

Ten Secrets to Improved Communication with the Important People in Your Life

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Most of the time, when couples come in for counseling their biggest complaints are: “poor communication and arguing.” And in my many years of helping couples stay connected, I’ve seen that poor communication has been a leading cause for couples to lose each other. However, this does not just apply to couples; it applies to all important relationships. Effective and acceptable communication makes the difference in a relationship. When communication is accepted and given/received on a regular basis, relationships stays healthy and grow. So how does this happen? Here are some ideas and suggestions. As I say to our clients, “You never have to do anything I suggest.”

1. **Take the time to find a good time and place.** Serious discussions need special attention. Please do not get into a serious discussion on an impulse or in reaction to a problem. “Never talk to upset people and never talk to people when upset.” . So you may need to ask, “When would be a good time to talk?” Many folks are very nervous about confrontation so they avoid it or get upset, cry or fly into a rage. So, it can be helpful to learn how to breathe deeply and relax. If your spouse is watching football and calm and you start the conversation with a lot of upset emotional, this will basically sabotage any relationship. Or if your partner is sleeping and you want to talk about a significant problem, this is what I consider “ambushing or abusing” your partner/spouse. Or if your friend is simply calm and reading, and you start talking fast and loudly, it can be unsettling. If the other person is calm, then you need to get your self calm.
2. **You can help your spouse not get defensive.** Getting defensive is normal and applies to both genders. This is a natural reaction for self protection or to protect your children or loved ones. So, a way to help the other person is to not give them a reason to be defensive. To avoid making your spouse as defensive, use the word “confused” when you can. Instead of saying, “I was really mad when you didn’t call me back and you knew I needed to talk,” say “I know you care about me, and want me to be okay, so it was really confusing to not get a call.” Too many folks use the word “never” or “always” in these kinds of conversations. “You never call me back when you know I need it.”
3. **Avoid jumping to conclusions or mind reading.** Yes, you may know your friend very well, but you really can’t read your mind. And even if you’re a good “guesser” it can sound very insulting. “I know what you’re thinking!” (So, this means I have no right to have any private thoughts of my own? Or, since you know what I’m thinking, I don’t have a right to speak for myself? Give him or her benefit of the doubt by asking to clear things up. None of us can read another person’s mind, and yet we often assume we know what our spouse is thinking or intending—and we’re often off-base.
4. **Talking about serious things means two people need to act like “Real Partners”.** Say things like, “Finally I get to talk this through with you... I always feel better when I can talk things over with you because you’re really good at just listening. I like being partners.”
5. **Use your friend’s name during the conversation.** It’s amazing how many people, especially couples, don’t call each other by name very often. It’s much more intimate and bonding to say, “Gil, you’re always so wonderful about listening to me when I need to talk” than to have a long conversation without using your partner’s name. I know I like to hear my name. I know many others do too. Even though you may use “Honey” or

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- “Sweetie” on a regular basis, use your partner’s name at least occasionally, also. It does make a difference.
6. **Give your undivided attention when you’re talking.** Of course, some short conversations take place when both partners are on the run, but for important communication, you’ll want to schedule time to talk when you can turn off the electronics, and get rid of things that interrupt. One of the most powerful ways for a man to express his love to his lover or wife is to turn off the TV, especially when watching that football game, etc. etc. and say, “I need to really listen to you.”
 7. **Body language is the most important part of effective communication,** over 63% comes from body language. Eye contact makes a huge difference. It’s distracting and unsettling to talk to someone who is watching TV, reading or looking down and not making eye contact. The message can feel like, “I guess I’m not really important right now.” Negative body language can really turn things off: “rolling the eyes, walking away without an explanation or civil comment, grunts, groans, frustrated sighing, and on and on.”
 8. **Stay focused on the present** not the past or the future. Avoid thinking about what you’re going to do at work the next day or what happened yesterday.
 9. **Many people learn after coming to counseling that they really do need to make appointments with each other just to talk!** Or even more importantly, time away from the daily grind and just be alone. It’s easy for communication to get avoided, rejected, or seriously destroyed in busy routines.
 10. **Respect is more important than love.** Sure, love is important, but for an established relationship and to deal with conflict, respect comes first. If you focus only on “he doesn’t love me anymore or she doesn’t love me anymore,” you may end up sabotaging the relationship with your own disrespectful behavior and guessing wrong about the love issue. Your friend, partner or spouse has every right to have his/her opinions, beliefs, and ideas, even if you think he or she is “wrong” or off-base. Instead of saying, “That’s stupid,” say something like; “Let me think about that.” “That’s an interesting idea. I hadn’t thought of it that way before. I think differently because...” Remember, name calling or belittlement will stop honest communication because your partner won’t feel emotionally safe.