

Chapter 6

Does Your Communication Connect or Divide You?



Most couples who struggle in their relationship say communication is the number one problem. Not that they don't know how to talk. It is that their talk does not lead to a connection. Learn how to use your conversation to connect with your spouse by mastering the following five skills:

General Communication Skills

1. Be a Recorder: Play Back What Your Spouse Just Said
2. Be a Mirror: Reflect Back What Your Spouse is Feeling
3. Dig Deeper

Conflict Communication Skills

4. Express Yourself Without Attacking
5. Defuse the Tension

General Communication Skills

1. Be a Voice Recorder: Play Back What Your Spouse Just Said



Your spouse shares something important with you. To ensure you hear and understand it, you repeat or restate in your own words to your spouse the words he or she just said.

It sounds something like this:

So what you're saying is . . .

You then repeat your spouse's exact words or paraphrase them. This is like hitting the playback button on a recording device. Check out this video.



[On Being a Reflective Listener](#)

When you finish reflecting, end by asking, "Did I get it right?" Or "Do I correctly understand what you just said?" You want your spouse to confirm to you that you accurately understand him/her before you interact any further.

When this occurs, you are communicating in a way that connects.

2. Be a Mirror: Reflect Back Your Spouse's Feelings



We often assume we understand how our spouse is feeling, but we really don't know. Since the emotional connection to our spouse is at the core of a healthy marriage, we must get this right. We communicate when we recognize what our spouse is feeling and express understanding.

Identifying your spouse's feelings goes something like this: "Given what you just said, I sense *you are feeling* ____ (name the emotion). Is this right?" If you are not 100% correct, your spouse will let you know more precisely the emotion being experienced, so the two of you really understand each other.

There is *another way* to tune into your spouse's feelings. We most often discern our partner's feelings through facial expressions and body language. Here is a second approach. Close your eyes and listen. Some have observed that we can more accurately read another's emotions when we don't look at the person, but just listen to them.

When you connect with your spouse's feelings, you get this response, "That's exactly how I feel." When this occurs, you are communicating in a way that connects. (See

the chapters on emotion and empathy for further discussion).

3. Dig Deeper



Can you briefly postpone expressing your point of view in order to learn more about your spouse's perspective? This will help in having a productive conversation.

More specifically, after your spouse has shared his/her thoughts and feelings with you, dig deeper by asking follow-up questions. This shows that you are truly interested in what is significant to your mate. Here are examples:

Tell me more.

What's the backstory?

What did you mean when you said...

How did you come to this opinion?

Why does this make you feel the way it does?

How do you think this will affect you in the future?

You can also use the 5 W and 1 H questions as a basis for digging deeper:

Who? What? When?

Where? Why? How?

The larger point is the more curious you are about what's going on with your spouse, the more you are communicating in a way that connects.

Conflict Communication Skills

4. Express Yourself Without Attacking



You may feel that showing your spouse respect is hard to do. This is especially true if you view your mate as “sub-human,” “mentally ill,” “a parasite,” and the like. Such labels dehumanize your mate, narrowly defining who s/he is, while ignoring the fuller picture. Once someone reduces another person to a derogatory description, it becomes easier to disrespect them.

But the truth is, we cannot accurately categorize human beings in such a way. As Soviet dissident and Pulitzer Prize winner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, wrote,

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Your spouse does not differ from you in that s/he not only has an unflattering side, but a positive one as well. This makes your spouse worthy of the same respect you also deserve.

a. Be Respectful

When our spouses feel attacked, we narrow their range of responses to one: defending themselves, which usually includes “return fire.” It means an escalation of words, hard feelings, and eventually a desire to disengage.

The key to not being disrespectful is to protect your spouse’s character. You can criticize behavior or unwanted outcomes your spouse created but avoid character assassination, like *you are such an idiot*.

In the following video, you will note the difference between initiating a conversation “softly” vs “harshly. (Warning: The speaker uses the “F” word in one instance).



[Two ways a conversation can begin](#)

b. A Better Way: I-Statements

I-statements are used to help people get their point across without being accusatory and putting the other person on the defensive. Compare the following examples.

You need to shape up.

vs. I think things need to change.

You made me upset.

vs. I feel upset.

You treat me like an employee .

vs. I don't feel like an equal.

You're such a slob.

*vs. I become upset when the house is
such a mess.*

You're the problem

vs. We have serious issues to discuss.

Notice the statements in italics **do not blame!** Also, notice the first statement in each pairing talks about “you” (the other person), while none in italics do. They are about “I.”

Yet the statements in italics fully communicate the person's thinking and frustration without putting the other person on the defensive.

c. An Alternative to Attacking

Here is a **three-fold outline** of how to ask for what you want or need without causing your spouse to become defensive.

1. Share what you are feeling.
2. Describe the problematic **situation**, NOT the problematic spouse. This is key!
3. Express what you need.

Example: Your Spouse overspends.

You: *Now I am worried that we will not have enough money to pay all our bills this month.*

Can we please set up a monthly budget we stick to? I need peace of mind.

NOT: “*You bought what? You’re so irresponsible.*”

Example: Your Spouse stayed out very late after an argument.

You: I felt very insecure last night. I didn’t know where you were or what you were doing. I am worried about how we deal with our differences. The next time we disagree, can we agree to just go to separate rooms until we both calm down? I hate being left alone.

NOT: “*You’re a coward for leaving.*”

Example: One spouse accuses the other of cheating.

You: I am shocked by the accusation. I know we have problems in our marriage, but I can’t believe you think so little of me. We need to sit down and discuss how you came to this conclusion and allow me to defend myself against this untruth.

NOT: “*There’s something wrong with you.*”

In all these examples, the speaker effectively gets his or her point across without attack. Like all the other areas discussed above, when this type of communication occurs, you are communicating in a way that connects.

5. Defuse Tensions by Agreeing with Your Spouse



This is probably the most difficult step in the communication process.

Agreeing with your spouse, **stepping to their side**, means rather than just arguing your point, you allow room for your mate's perspective. Negotiator Dr. William Ury explains,

Stepping to their [the other's] side may be the last thing you feel like doing in a confrontational situation. When they close their ears, you naturally feel like doing the same. When they refuse to recognize your point of view, you certainly don't feel like recognizing theirs. When they disagree with everything you say, you may find it difficult to agree with anything they say. Although entirely understandable, this tit-for-tat response is a recipe for stalemate. To break through the other side's resistance, you need to reverse this dynamic.... If you want them to listen to you, begin by listening to them. If you want them to acknowledge your point, acknowledge theirs first.

What this means is, when you and your spouse are arguing, you find some truth in what s/he is saying. *You're right on this point, or I agree with you that...* The key is finding

something your spouse says that you can affirm.



The following three illustrations come from audio podcasts by psychiatrist, Dr. David Burns, who developed the “Disarming Technique.” I am entitling the first podcast, **“How Can I Agree with That?”**

Click this link:

<https://feelinggood.com/2016/12/19/015-the-five-secrets-of-effective-communication-part-2/>

Start at around 8 min. 30 sec.

Listen until around the 12:10 mark.

The second example shows how this technique can work even in an extreme situation. I entitle it, **“Six Foot Seven.”**

Click this link:

<https://feelinggood.com/2017/05/08/036-ask-david-empowering-the-victim-with-the-five-secrets/>

Start at around 4 min. 29 sec.

Listen until around the 9:47 mark.

This third example also shows what happens when we use this technique. I am entitling this **“A Common Marriage Scenario.”**

Click this link:

<https://feelinggood.com/2017/12/11/066-five-secrets-training-the-disarming-technique/>

Start at around 13:20.

Listen until around the 16:46 mark.

This skill will require practice before you get good at it. But given the potential results, it is well worth the time.

Agreeing with Your Spouse: 3 Tips

a. Limit the Scope. One helpful way of thinking about this technique is to limit any criticism as being *in the context of your relationship*, or, *in the way you relate to me*. This is not the same as telling your spouse that you are the same way in every situation. It softens the “blow.”

Thus is If your partner says to you, “You are an uncaring person,” you can limit your spouse’s words to mean, “You don’t care about me,” or “You are uncaring in the way you relate to me.” You can respond by saying, “I agree with you. I’ve not been as sensitive to your feelings as I should be.” Or, “You’re right. I can see how my remarks made you feel I didn’t care about you.”

Similarly, it helps to respond to an overarching criticism by translating it into **something concrete**. You do this by asking your spouse to be more specific. For example, you mate says, “you are unthoughtful.” After asking why s/he says this, you learn that the statement refers to the fact, “you forgot my birthday,” with which you can agree.

The overall idea in this section is to take what might seem like a criticism by your

spouse of you as a person and narrow its scope down to what's going on in the relationship.

b. Acknowledge Falling Short of Your Mate's Expectations. At the very least, you should be able to agree that whatever your spouse blames you for is true to him/her. Can you concede that you have fallen short of your spouse's ideal? For example, "I agree with you. I am not meeting your expectations. I am failing to do what you want me to do." When you acknowledge you haven't met your spouse's expectations, you step to your partner's side and lessen the distance between you.

c. Begin with the Words, "You're Right." When you begin with the words, "You're right," you are forced to identify something your spouse says that contains some truth. Example:

Spouse: *You never listen to what I say.*

You: *You're right. There are times I don't give you my full attention, and that is not being respectful to you.*

Spouse: *No matter how much I do for the family, all you do is criticize me.*

You: *You're right. I have failed to let you know how much I appreciate all of your efforts.*

Use this communication skill, and you will communicate in a way that really connects.

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