

Principles of Good Communication

Many individuals and couples who get into trouble while communicating do so because they repeatedly violate some basic principles in communication. This greatly complicates their problems and increases the likelihood of developing anger, resentment and bitterness. These are some guidelines for cultivating constructive communication while in the midst of conflict. About 50 percent of the conflicts that couples have could be resolved by merely applying these principles.

1. Never have any physical contact with your partner out of anger. Even seemingly innocuous things like holding, pinching, or poking can escalate the conflict.

2. Listen to your partner attentively. Empathetic listening – that is, putting yourself in the other person's position – is very helpful. Eye contact and body language is very important in communicating interest.

3. "Share a meaning" – Often in arguments we are so concerned about our defense or what we are going to say next that we don't really hear what the other person has to say. If either party senses that this is happening, it is appropriate to ask for what's called a "shared meaning", a restating of the issue. For instance, if you aren't really sure what the other person is trying to say, you might say, "I'd like to be sure that I understand what you're saying. Are you saying. . .?" Or, you might say to your partner, "I'm not sure we're on the same wavelength. Would you mind putting in your own words what I've just shared so that I can be sure that we are following each other?"

4. Don't interrupt. Make it a rule that whoever is speaking has the right to complete his or her thoughts without interruption. Both parties should try to speak fairly briefly and not, in essence, filibuster the situation. If this becomes a problem, you may have to agree on how much time each person is allowed to talk.

5. Limit your discussion to only one issue. If at all possible, stick to one subject. Many couples get into a great deal of trouble because, before long, they have half a dozen different topics going, and when that occurs, nothing can be accomplished. If your partner pulls out a laundry list of gripes, keep the discussion focused on the original issue.

6. Speak from your own perspective. It is crucial that you speak from your own perspective and allow the other person the right to a differing view. Seldom, if ever does either party have the absolute truth on a given issue. Two individuals witnessing the same automobile accident often see it differently. Even if you fully believe you are in the right, if you state it in such a way as to give the other person some room, you are facilitating dialogue. For instance, instead of saying, "That is NOT what happened," instead say some like, "From my perspective, it appears. . ."

7. Use "I feel" messages and avoid "you" messages. Typically, "you" messages feel like attacking to the other party. Also, they seldom are defensible. On the other hand, if you speak about your own needs, wishes, wants, desire or viewpoint, you give the other person the right to be himself or herself and to have a different perspective.

8. Avoid put-downs. A sweeping judgment or put-down is highly destructive. Statements such as "You're stupid" or "You can't do anything right" hinder constructive communication. You should refrain from ridicule,

shaming, judging, criticizing, and faultfinding. Devaluing body language such as eye-rolling, laughing, grimaces, or groans should be avoided.

9. Avoid all-inclusive statements. Avoid using words such as never or always when you make a point. To do so is to make sweeping generalizations, and typically what happens is that you end up arguing about whether or not the all-inclusive statement is true. Thus you have left the original discussion and are accomplishing nothing.

10. Avoid humor during arguments. Couples who are unable to resolve issues very well usually find humor or sarcasm to be highly destructive. Unless your relationship is strong and secure, avoid using humor during arguments.

11. Avoid assumptive mind-reading. Sometimes one partner assumes the other person knows or should know what he or she is thinking. Or the reverse can be true. You might guess at what the other party is thinking without checking it out. Either way, assumptions usually lead to trouble.

12. Try not to be the “authority.” There is often a temptation for at least one party to come across as the authority. This can take two forms, parenting and patronizing. Parenting statements include ordering, directing, admonishing, threatening, moralizing, preaching, advising, giving solutions, using logic, interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing, probing, questioning, or interrogating. Patronizing statements take the form of excessive or inappropriate reassuring, sympathizing, or consoling. All these are destructive for adult-to-adult communication.

13. Continue to dialogue until both parties have said all they want to say. Storming out of a conversation or using the silent treatment are highly destructive. However, do not continue the dialogue when any of the following situations occur:

- If a person is unable to collect his or her thoughts on the issue and needs some time to think it through.
- If either party feels as if he or she might lose control physically. Both of these reasons to stop the discussion and possibly separate for a time. However, as soon as it is feasible, the dialogue should be continued, and it is the responsibility of the person who stopped the discussion to initiate further conversation.
- If the time is inappropriate. For example, if you have to leave to pick up the kids from school, or if it is 2:00 AM and one or both of you has to get up at 6:00 AM. In such cases it is usually best to recess until a better, mutually agreed upon time to pick up the conversation.

A final note: When one person violates these guidelines I urge the other party not to make an issue of it, and, if possible, not to even mention it. I recommend that they simply continue on with the dialogue and continue practicing the guideline to the best of their ability.