

Communication Strategies That WORK!

Throughout our lives we are sold two dreams; however, neither of them paints a realistic picture of a truly rewarding relationship. The first dream unfolds when we are little, and we see movies and depictions of fairytale relationships where everything is perfect—happy beginnings and happily ever after. It sells us on the magical prince and princess falling in love and then existing in a state of constant bliss. This dream sounds ideal, so why shouldn't we believe it?

On the other hand, as we grow up we are sold a completely different dream. This one tells us that after the initial “pink cloud” of the relationship dissipates, the rest is dysfunctional and a lot of yuck—with some high points in-between. In this dream, it is as if we have two people playing in a sporting event without realizing that they are on the same team. Instead, they are competing for who is right and who is wrong or who holds power. It tells us that we are lucky to have an okay ending instead of a happily ever after.

So, which dream is reality for you? Or, does there have to be a choice? Yes and no. Yes, you have to choose to give up the fairytale dream. But, you can create the dream you desire. Really you can! However, it all starts with realizing that you are both on the same team and that the team can't succeed as long as you or your partner don't commit to the team concept. More about the team concept will be discussed in the next chapter, but for now let's focus on one factor that makes a team successful.

The vital factor that makes a team work is communication.

Okay, I know you have heard this a million times, but have you ever truly tried to implement some communication strategies in your own life? The following techniques are small steps, and many people dismiss them because of their simplicity. Why is it that we try to complicate things? Let's keep it simple. If you use these techniques in your relationship I guarantee that your partnership will improve.

Never use the words always or never.

If someone ever has told you, “You always do this or never do that,” does it really make you want to listen? No, it feels more like an exaggeration of the truth and can make you feel defensive. It is not effective and won't help you build a better team; throw the phrase in the garbage.

Use “When, What, How” statements.

Instead of generalizing with always or never, get specific. This can be for a positive statement or a negative one.

Being specific will make the person feel like you are not judging their whole character, but rather looking at a specific behavior.

For example: Yesterday (when something happened) when you left your clothes on the floor (what they did) it made me feel like you didn't notice or appreciate the effort I put into cleaning (how it made you feel). This sentence clearly tells your partner what makes you feel good instead of expecting them to guess.

Try to focus on the positive whenever possible. You and your partner want to make each other feel good, don't you? As soon as people feel negativity the automatic reaction is to turn on protection mode, not just because they don't want to be viewed a certain way but because they don't want to view themselves in a negative way. I'll give you a perfect example: If you want your partner to help more around the house, don't focus on the times he or she does not help, focus on when your partners does, and make him or her feel good about it by stating your appreciation.

For example: Last night (when) when you washed the dishes (what) I really appreciated it because I was tired (how you felt). Your partner would be more willing to do the things that please you if that person feels a genuine recognition of what he or she has done and that it meant a lot to you. However, what tends to happen in relationships is that people point out the negative more than the positive, which of course means they get more of the negative.

Make a feel good sandwich.

Whenever there are negative situations that you need to address with your partner, soften it by making sure that the negative is in the middle of a positive sandwich. Start with some positives—such as things that you appreciate about him or her— this reminds your partner that you are looking at the team and that you see that person's good qualities more than anything. Afterward, state specifically the behavior that negatively affects you. Don't focus too much on it, and then finish it with another positive statement. However, make sure that you are also making positive statements at other times too, not just when you are trying to bring up something negative. Otherwise, as soon as you say something positive they will be waiting for you to try to stuff them with a feel good sandwich.

Make commitments to improve the relationship.

Make some time to create a list of ways that you and your partner can make a better team. Each of you should offer ideas of what you can do that will make the relationship better, rather than pointing out what the other person should do. Remember it is a team effort, and if you feel like you have nothing to change you are not being realistic—we all can improve in some area of our lives.

Commit to one or two small changes you will each make each week. Encourage the small steps that your partner makes by recognizing and affirming his or her efforts. Remember that changing ingrained patterns can take time, so commit weekly to new efforts you are willing to make or re-commit to old ones you still need to work on.

Don't try to be right just to prove a point.

Ask yourself, "Is this going to matter in a month or a year?" "Is the problem significant enough to impact our relationship as a whole or is it petty?" "Is the problem more important than the team?" Learn to stop yourself from engaging in unproductive arguments that only deteriorate relationships.

Listen.

A little secret of problem solving in relationships is that most problems get solved by just listening. Believe it or not, most people just want to feel heard, whether you agree or not. When people feel heard and understood most problems just disappear. Seriously, it is that magical.

So, how does your partner know you are listening? First, stop talking and pay attention to what they are saying without thinking about the things you're going to say when they are done. Then, paraphrase what your partner is saying. Repeat it back to them in your own words. Validate his or her feelings by letting your partner know you understand what those feelings are, even if you don't agree with the reasons. For example: So what you are saying is that you feel (fill in the blank).

Make "I" statements.

Don't make it about how bad his or her behavior is; make it about *your* feelings. Instead of "You always ignore me when I talk because you're always on the computer," rephrase it as an "I" statement. Don't forget to drop the word "always" and use the three magic words. "When you were using the computer last night (when) and you didn't respond to what I was saying (what), I really felt that the computer is more important than I am (how)."

Remember, your partner will most likely be your greatest teacher and student in your life. The biggest challenge you have as a student is letting go of your ego and being open to the experience that life has created to teach you. All it takes is your willingness to listen. If you want happiness and success in your relationship all you have to do is start thinking as a team and your potential is limitless.