

# Communication Starter Pack

## Evidence-Based Tools for Couples

### A Comprehensive Guide to Better Communication

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*Helping couples build stronger relationships through  
evidence-based communication strategies*

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# Introduction

Welcome to the Communication Starter Pack! This guide contains practical, evidence-based tools to help you and your partner communicate more effectively, resolve conflicts constructively, and deepen your emotional connection.

## Why Communication Matters

Communication is the foundation of every strong relationship. Research by Dr. John Gottman shows that how couples communicate—especially during conflict—predicts relationship success with over 90% accuracy. The good news? Communication is a skill that can be learned and improved with practice.

## How to Use This Guide

This starter pack contains seven essential communication tools plus a 30-day challenge to help you build lasting habits. Each section includes:

- Clear explanations of the technique
- Step-by-step instructions
- Practical examples
- Exercises to practice together
- Common pitfalls to avoid

■ **Pro Tip:** Don't try to master everything at once. Pick one tool that resonates with you and practice it for a week before moving to the next one. Small, consistent improvements lead to lasting change.

# 1. The Art of Active Listening

Active listening is the foundation of effective communication. It means fully concentrating on what your partner is saying, understanding their message, and responding thoughtfully— rather than just waiting for your turn to speak.

## The Three Levels of Listening

Level	Description	Example
Internal Listening	Focused on your own thoughts, judgments, and responses.	"That makes sense." (thinking about what to say next)
Focused Listening	Paying attention to words and tone, but not emotions.	"I hear you saying you're upset"
Global Listening	Tuning into words, emotions, body language, and what's really important to you.	"I hear you saying you're upset, and you seem worried"

## The 5 Steps of Active Listening

1. **Give Full Attention** — Put down your phone, turn off the TV, make eye contact
2. **Show You're Listening** — Nod, lean in, say 'mm-hmm' or 'I see'
3. **Reflect Back** — Paraphrase what you heard: 'So you're saying...'
4. **Ask Clarifying Questions** — 'Can you tell me more about that?'
5. **Validate Feelings** — 'That makes sense' or 'I can understand why you'd feel that way'

### ■ Practice Exercise: The 5-Minute Listening Challenge

#### Instructions:

1. Partner A speaks for 5 minutes about their day while Partner B practices active listening
2. Partner B then reflects back what they heard: "What I heard you say is..."
3. Partner A confirms or clarifies
4. Switch roles and repeat

**Rules:** The listener cannot interrupt, give advice, or relate it to their own experience. Just listen, reflect, and validate.

■ **Common Pitfall:** Many people think they're listening when they're actually just formulating their response. True active listening means setting aside your own agenda and being genuinely curious about your partner's experience.

## 2. Speaking Your Truth with I-Statements

I-statements help you express your feelings and needs without blaming or criticizing your partner. They reduce defensiveness and create space for productive dialogue.

### The I-Statement Formula

"I feel [EMOTION] when [SITUATION] because [NEED/VALUE]. I need/would like [REQUEST]."

### Before & After Examples

■ You-Statement (Blame)	■ I-Statement (Ownership)
"You never help with the dishes!"	"I feel overwhelmed when the dishes pile up because I value a clean kitchen."
"You're always on your phone!"	"I feel disconnected when we're both on our phones during dinner because I need to feel present with you."
"You don't care about my feelings!"	"I feel hurt when I share something important and don't get a response because I need to feel heard."

### The Four Components Explained

**EMOTION:** Use specific feeling words (hurt, frustrated, anxious, excited) not thoughts disguised as feelings ('I feel like you don't care' is actually a thought)

**SITUATION:** Describe the specific, observable behavior without judgment ('when you checked your phone during our conversation' not 'when you ignored me')

**NEED/VALUE:** Explain the underlying need ('because I need to feel heard' or 'because I value our time together')

**REQUEST:** Make a clear, specific, actionable request ('Could we set aside 30 minutes each evening to talk?' not 'I need you to be better')

### ➡ ■ Practice Exercise: I-Statement Transformation

Transform these You-statements into I-statements:

1. "You never listen to me!"
2. "You're always late!"
3. "You don't appreciate anything I do!"

**Practice with your partner:** Each person shares one thing that's been bothering them using the

I-statement formula. The listener practices active listening and validates the feeling.

## 3. Managing Difficult Conversations

Every relationship has topics that are hard to discuss—money, sex, in-laws, parenting styles, household responsibilities. These conversations are important, but they require special care to navigate successfully.

### The PREPARE Method

Pick the right time and place — Not when tired, hungry, or rushed

Request permission — 'Is now a good time to talk about something important?'

Express your positive intention — 'I want us to feel closer' or 'I want to solve this together'

Present the issue objectively — Use I-statements and specific examples

Acknowledge different perspectives — 'I know we see this differently'

Request specific changes — Be clear about what you need

End with appreciation — Thank your partner for engaging with you

### The Timing Test

Before starting a difficult conversation, ask yourself:

- ✓ Are we both calm and not stressed?
- ✓ Do we have at least 30-45 minutes without interruptions?
- ✓ Have we both eaten recently and are well-rested?
- ✓ Are we sober and not under the influence?
- ✓ Have we agreed this is a good time to talk?

If you answer "no" to any of these, schedule the conversation for later.

### Sample Conversation Opener

*"Hey, I'd like to talk with you about our budget. I know money conversations can be stressful, and I want you to know that my goal isn't to criticize or control—I want us to feel more financially secure together. Is now a good time, or would you prefer to set aside time this weekend?"*

■ **Pro Tip:** For recurring difficult topics (finances, sex, division of labor), schedule regular "state of the union" meetings. Having a predictable time to discuss these issues reduces anxiety and prevents resentment buildup.

## 4. Fighting Fair: Ground Rules for Conflict

Conflict is normal and inevitable in relationships. The goal isn't to eliminate conflict— it's to fight in ways that bring you closer together rather than tearing you apart.

### The Four Horsemen of Relationship Apocalypse

Dr. John Gottman identified four communication patterns that predict divorce with 90% accuracy:

Destructive Pattern	What It Looks Like	Antidote
1. Criticism	Attacking character or personality: 'You're so <del>clay</del> crazy!'	Clearly explain about behavior: 'I'm frustrated the dishes aren't done'
2. Contempt	Expressing disgust, eye-rolling, mockery, sarcasm	Build a culture of appreciation and respect
3. Defensiveness	Making excuses, cross-complaining, 'Yes, but...'	Take responsibility, even for 5% of the problem
4. Stonewalling	Shutting down, giving silent treatment, walking away	Take a break, self-soothe, return when calm

### 10 Ground Rules for Fair Fighting

1. Stay focused on the current issue — No bringing up past grievances
2. Use I-statements — Take ownership of your feelings
3. No name-calling or insults — Ever. Period.
4. Take breaks when flooded — If your heart rate exceeds 100 bpm, pause for 20+ minutes
5. No generalizations — Avoid 'always' and 'never'
6. Listen to understand, not to win — The goal is resolution, not victory
7. Stick to one topic — Don't kitchen-sink multiple complaints
8. Accept influence from your partner — Be willing to compromise
9. Look for the 5% you can own — Taking partial responsibility breaks gridlock
10. End with repair attempts — Use humor, affection, or a time-out signal

### ➡■ Create Your Fighting Fair Agreement

Together with your partner, discuss and agree on:

- Your personal time-out signal (word or gesture) when things get too heated
- How long breaks should be (minimum 20 minutes, maximum 24 hours)
- Which topics require scheduled conversations vs. can be discussed spontaneously



- What repair attempts work for you (humor? touch? apology?)

Write down your agreements and post them where you'll both see them.

## 5. Weekly Check-In Template

Regular check-ins prevent small issues from becoming big problems. Schedule a weekly 30-minute check-in to maintain connection and address concerns early.

### Weekly Check-In Structure

Time	Topic	Questions to Ask
0-5 min	Appreciation	What's one thing your partner did this week that you're grateful for?
5-15 min	Connection	What was a high point and low point of your week? How can I support you this week?
15-25 min	Issues/Planning	Is there anything we need to discuss or plan for? Any relationship concerns?
25-30 min	Closing	How do you feel about us right now? What's one thing we can do to stay connected this

### Additional Weekly Check-In Questions

- On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel to me right now?
- Is there anything I did this week that hurt your feelings?
- What's one way I could better support you this week?
- How's your stress level? What's weighing on you?
- Is there anything you need from me that you're not getting?
- What's one thing we did well as a couple this week?
- Are there any upcoming events/decisions we need to discuss?
- How's our physical intimacy? Any adjustments needed?
- What are you looking forward to next week?
- Is there anything you've been wanting to tell me but haven't?

■ **Pro Tip:** Protect your check-in time like a doctor's appointment. Put it on the calendar, silence phones, and create a comfortable environment (maybe with tea or wine). Consistency is more important than perfection.

## 6. Conversation Starters for Deep Connection

Deep conversations create intimacy. These questions help you move beyond surface-level small talk and discover new things about your partner—even if you've been together for years.

### Level 1: Getting to Know You

- What's your earliest childhood memory?
- If you could have dinner with anyone living or dead, who and why?
- What's a belief you held strongly as a child that you no longer believe?
- What's your most treasured possession and why?
- What would constitute a 'perfect' day for you?
- When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?

### Level 2: Dreams and Values

- If you could wake up tomorrow with any quality or ability, what would it be?
- What does friendship mean to you?
- What roles do love and affection play in your life?
- If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about your life or future, what would you want to know?
- What's something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- What do you value most in a friendship? In a romantic relationship?

### Level 3: Vulnerability and Intimacy

- What's your most terrible memory?
- When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
- Is there something you've dreamed of doing that you've been too afraid to attempt?
- Complete this sentence: 'I wish I had someone with whom I could share...'
- What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
- If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate, what would you most regret not having told someone?
- Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?

- Share a personal problem and ask your partner for advice on how they might handle it

## Relationship-Focused Questions

- What do you love most about our relationship?
- What's one thing you wish we did more often together?
- How do you like to receive love and affection?
- What's a moment from our relationship that you'll never forget?
- How can I better support your dreams and goals?
- What do you need from me when you're stressed or upset?
- Where do you see us in 5 years? 10 years?
- What's something I do that makes you feel loved and appreciated?

—■ **Try This:** Pick one question each night before bed and take turns answering. The goal isn't to interview each other—it's to create a space for mutual vulnerability and discovery. Listen without judgment and share with openness.

## 7. Repair Strategies After Arguments

Every couple fights. What separates happy couples from unhappy ones isn't the absence of conflict—it's their ability to repair after conflict. Effective repair attempts can prevent a single argument from damaging your relationship.

### The 5 R's of Repair

1. **Recognize** the need for repair — Notice when disconnection has occurred
2. **Responsibility** — Own your part, even if it's just 5%
3. **Reach out** — Make the first move toward reconnection
4. **Reaffirm** your commitment — 'I don't want to fight. You matter to me'
5. **Reconnect** — Use humor, touch, or shared activity to rebuild intimacy

### Effective Repair Statements

#### Taking Responsibility:

- "I'm sorry"
- "That was my fault"
- "I can see my part in this"
- "I was wrong"

#### De-escalating:

- "Let's take a break"
- "I'm feeling overwhelmed. Can we pause?"
- "This is getting too heated. I need to calm down"
- "Can we start over?"

#### Showing Appreciation:

- "I appreciate you"
- "I love you even when we fight"
- "Thank you for staying and working through this"

- "You're important to me"

## Finding Common Ground:

- "We're on the same team"
- "This is US vs. the problem, not me vs. you"
- "I know we both want to solve this"
- "Let's find a compromise"

## The 24-Hour Repair Rule

Commit to repairing within 24 hours of any argument. Even if you can't fully resolve the issue, you can reconnect emotionally. A simple 'I hate when we fight. I love you' can prevent resentment from taking root.

■ **Create Your Repair Ritual:** Some couples have a code word, others use physical touch, and some schedule a post-fight check-in. Find what works for you and commit to it. The goal is to break the negative cycle and remind each other that your relationship is more important than any single conflict.

## 8. 30-Day Communication Challenge

Knowledge without action changes nothing. This 30-day challenge helps you build lasting communication habits. Complete one practice each day with your partner.

### Week 1: Active Listening Foundation

- Day 1: 5-minute listening exercise (no interrupting)
- Day 2: Practice reflecting back what you heard
- Day 3: Ask 3 open-ended questions during a conversation
- Day 4: Notice your partner's body language during a chat
- Day 5: Put phones away for 30 minutes and talk
- Day 6: Practice validating feelings ('That makes sense because...')
- Day 7: Share appreciation for how your partner communicates

### Week 2: I-Statements and Vulnerability

- Day 8: Transform one complaint into an I-statement
- Day 9: Share something you're worried about
- Day 10: Express a need you've been hesitant to share
- Day 11: Practice the I-statement formula during a minor conflict
- Day 12: Share a dream or hope for your future together
- Day 13: Tell your partner what makes you feel loved
- Day 14: Weekly check-in (use the template from Section 5)

### Week 3: Navigating Conflict

- Day 15: Review your Fighting Fair Agreement together
- Day 16: Practice taking a time-out during a disagreement
- Day 17: Own your 5% in a conflict
- Day 18: Use a repair statement after any tension
- Day 19: Answer a Level 2 question from Section 6
- Day 20: Discuss a difficult topic using the PREPARE method
- Day 21: Celebrate how you've grown this week

## Week 4: Deepening Connection

- Day 22: Share your most treasured memory together
- Day 23: Answer a Level 3 vulnerability question
- Day 24: Express gratitude for 3 specific things your partner did
- Day 25: Discuss your relationship goals for the next year
- Day 26: Practice a new repair strategy
- Day 27: Plan your next date night together
- Day 28: Weekly check-in + celebrate your progress
- Day 29: Write your partner a letter about what this challenge taught you
- Day 30: Commitment ceremony—decide which practices to continue

■ **Make It Stick:** After completing the 30-day challenge, choose 3 practices to continue permanently: perhaps weekly check-ins, daily appreciation, and using I-statements. Small, consistent habits create lasting relationship transformation.



# Conclusion: Your Communication Journey

Congratulations on taking this important step toward better communication! Remember, communication is a skill that improves with practice. You won't master everything overnight, and that's okay. What matters is your commitment to growth and your willingness to keep trying.

## Key Takeaways

- Communication is the foundation of relationship success
- Active listening means understanding, not just hearing
- I-statements reduce defensiveness and promote understanding
- All couples fight—repair is what matters
- Regular check-ins prevent small issues from becoming big problems
- Vulnerability creates intimacy
- Small, consistent practices create lasting change

## Next Steps

1. **Review** this guide together and pick one tool to start with
2. **Schedule** your first weekly check-in
3. **Begin** the 30-Day Communication Challenge
4. **Track** your progress and celebrate small wins
5. **Be patient** with yourself and your partner—change takes time

## Additional Resources

For more tools, worksheets, and support, visit:  
**[commitmentblueprint.com](https://commitmentblueprint.com)**

To dive deeper into the science of lasting relationships, read:

**The Commitment Blueprint** by Dr. Kevin Grolld

Available on Amazon

*"The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives.  
Invest in your relationship, and it will pay dividends for a lifetime."*

— Dr. Kevin Grolld