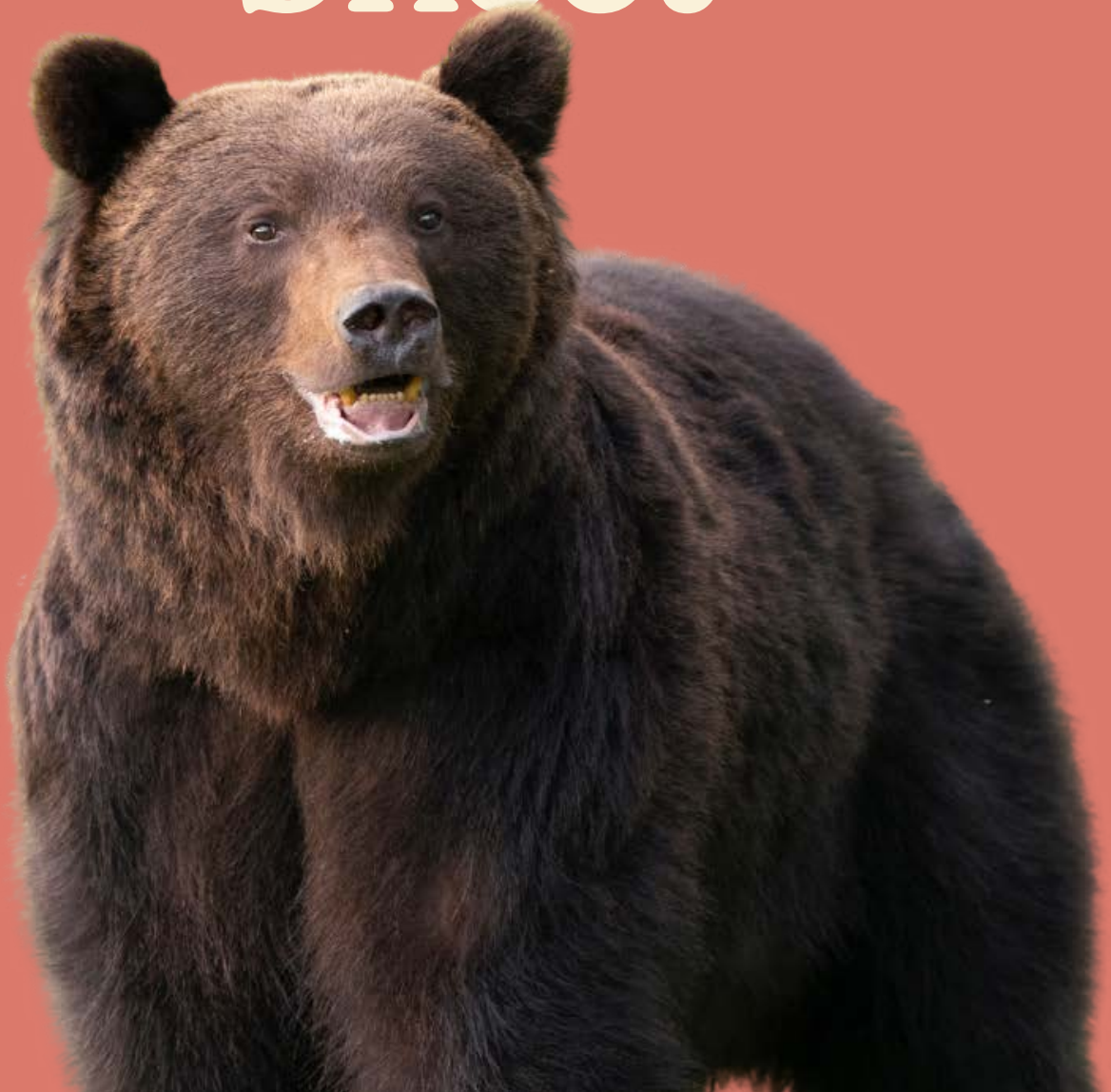


URSA  
PSYCHOLOGY

# The Communication Cheat Sheet



## Notes about the impact of COVID-19

The pandemic led to drastic social changes; We were sharing spaces differently, connecting with supports differently, and planning and prioritizing differently.

- Healthcare workers were found to be at increased risk of trauma and stress related disorders, depression, and anxiety
- Research showed some overall decreases in the pleasure, satisfaction, arousal and desire reported by couples because of worry, stress, and lack of privacy
- We also know that stress increases tension with couple relationships, particularly economic hardships
- With the increased stressors and increased isolation, already volatile relationships could worsen (e.g., experiences of intimate partner violence)
- Previous studies of post-disaster intimate partner victimization have shown large increases (e.g., 98% in a study of post-hurricane Katrina Mississippi) similar data for earthquakes, floods, oil spills, tsunamis, and fires globally

We know that couples are resilient and that there are important skills to build to support long-term healthy and satisfying relationships. Communication is one such skill.

## What is communication?

Communication is a two-part process involving (a) the sending and (b) the receiving of messages. Clear communication does not exist without the receiver actively listening to the sender's message and demonstrating that he/she understands it.

## How do we communicate?

We send messages in two main ways. The first way is through our verbal behaviour or what we say. This involves speaking about observations, thoughts, feelings, wants, or needs. The second way is through our non-verbal or how we deliver the message. This involves elements like our tone of voice, volume, eye contact, posture, facial expressions, and gestures.

We receive messages by listening carefully. This means attending to what the sender is trying to communicate both verbally and non-verbally and not focusing on your reaction to what the sender is saying. For example, being pre-occupied with coming up with a rebuttal, thinking of advice to give, or finding a phrase to reassure the sender is not using effective listening skills.

The receiver has the responsibility to ask for clarification if they are unsure of the message the sender is trying to get across. It is also the sender's responsibility to be patient and express the message again if the receiver asks clarifying questions.

## What is reflective listening?

Reflective listening is the most effective way for the receiver to show the sender that we understand their message. Reflective listening involves identifying

- a. the feeling inherent in the message
- b. the content of the message
- c. then reflecting those two components back to the sender.

Example:

**Sender:** *"I feel like quitting my job. My boss is always on my case and it seems like I can't do anything right."*

**Receiver (reflective listening):** *"It sounds like you're feeling really discouraged because your boss is criticizing everything you do."*

VS.

**Receiver (advice):** *"Why don't you just quit your job and find a different one?"*

**Receiver (reassurance):** *"Don't worry! Your boss is probably just having a bad day."*

**Receiver (reaction):** *"You can't quit your job! We need that second income, money is really tight right now."*

## What makes communication difficult?

Communication becomes difficult when tough topics come up, or when individuals are experiencing strong emotions like anger, fear, sadness, and frustration, yet these are often times when communicating effectively is essential.

Let's talk about a couple communication pitfalls that might occur during these times of high stress. A first example is using words like "always" and "never." How do you feel when someone starts off a sentence with "You never..."? Another common issue arises when people begin creating a laundry list of complaints to try to demonstrate another's failings and one's own moral superiority. There's even a term for this: *kitchen sinking* (Gottman) - meaning you throw everything in but the kitchen sink.

As the sender, it is important to be mindful of staying in the present moment and narrowing your focus to only the issue at hand. Strategies like using all-or-nothing phrasing or kitchen sinking can be tempting to use (especially when we are escalated) but are ultimately ineffective because they create defensiveness.

## Cues to Escalation

One of the most important first steps towards communicating successfully is to work to develop self-awareness and to take accountability for your own thoughts, feelings, and actions so you are able to identify times when you are feeling emotions so strongly that you will not be able to engage in effective communication. This can be challenging to do.

One strategy is to look for cues in our bodies, our emotions, our thinking, and our behaviour that tell us that we're getting to a place where we will not be effective communicators. Some people find it helpful to actually plot these out - what are the very first signs? What happens next? Do your cues build slowly and steadily over time, or are you a Ferrari- racing from calm to stressed in an instant? Learning about this process can help you to identify signs that intervention is needed before you communicate.

## Negotiated Time Outs

Taking time to yourself to decompress and engage in calming activities prior to beginning the process of communicating facilitates effective communication. Delaying communicating is usually much better than engaging in the process without feeling ready and having the communication process break down.

You can calmly tell the other person that you need to take some time to yourself before engaging in the discussion with them, and that you will return at a specific time to speak with them. Some couples find it helpful to use an agreed-upon signal like a “time out” hand gesture because verbal communication can be challenging (e.g., tone of voice, getting sucked back into the argument). Identifying a time that you believe you will be prepared to communicate with the other person is key because it shows them that you are committed to having the conversation and not simply trying to avoid it.

What are some things that you can do to relax and clear your mind when you are feeling strong emotions? This is a time to perform an activity that you find calming. Actually doing something is important - sitting and stewing is not going to be helpful. Some people have found that listening to their favourite music, journaling, meditating, walking their dog, or even folding laundry is relaxing and centers them. Try different things out. Be an experimenter and find what works best for you!

## Assertiveness

There is a simple four-part equation for effectively communicating a want or need and ensuring it has the best chance of being met.

- 1. Identify the behaviour that you would like the other person to change.** Identifying a specific behaviour rather than a personal characteristic means that the individual is less likely to take the feedback personally and also sees the issue as something that is much easier to change. Using words like “always” and “never” is particularly unhelpful because this tells the other person that you haven’t acknowledged times when they behaved in another way, and it supports a sense of hopelessness about the possibility for change.
- 2. Identify how you feel as a result of the behaviour you are asking them to change.** This clearly tells the other person what the impact of their behaviour is on you, and allows you to express your negative emotions in a respectful way.
- 3. Specify what you would like the other person to do in similar situations in the future.** Telling the other person what you would like them to do instead of their initial behaviour provides them with a clear idea of how the issue can be resolved.
- 4. Briefly explain the positive consequences, both for you and for them, associated with them choosing to act in the new way you identified.** This helps them to see how changing their behaviour will lead to good outcomes.

The formula looks like this:

***“When you (behaviour) I feel (emotion). Next time, I would like you to please (different behaviour). This will (explain positive consequences).”***

Example:

**Effective communication:** *“When you make a big purchase without consulting me, I feel hurt and nervous, and I worry about our finances. Next time I would like you to let me know if you are considering making a big purchase. That will help me to feel included and allow us to work together on budgeting and prioritizing, so we can continue saving for the things we want.”*

**Ineffective communication:** *“You are so selfish! How are we supposed to afford that?”*

## Knowing When to Say “No”

Many people find it difficult to say “no” sometimes. This could involve refusing a request or declining an invitation for instance. We might struggle to say no for a number of reasons, including the desire to be liked, trying not to hurt someone else’s feelings, or even feeling intimidated by the asker.

It is important to realize that, in most situations, being upfront and saying “no” in the first place is the best response both for you and for the asker. If we don’t say no in situations where we ought to, we can end up behaving in ways that are not consistent with our values. That might mean doing something you don’t want to do, for example helping someone to cheat on a test. It might mean trying to get out of doing what the asker wants by engaging in avoidant behaviour, like lying about being busy, or quitting a job. It might also mean suppressing frustration and letting resentment build until we explode and potentially damage or end the relationship, which usually results in us feeling remorseful and the asker feeling confused.

Saying no is a crucial part of setting boundaries. Boundaries are guidelines that help us to live a balanced lifestyle in line with the values we consider important. Setting boundaries allows us to distinguish between the ways we and others behave that are safe, reasonable, respectful, and healthy and those that are not. Having healthy boundaries means:

- a. Developing a good understanding of your wants, your needs, your thoughts, your beliefs, and your feelings.
- b. Being able to communicate assertively and truthfully in line with that self-knowledge.

Practicing self-care and being respectful, compassionate, and appreciative towards yourself is the foundation for setting healthy boundaries.

# Takeaways

**Relationship building activities:** Spend quality time together, not just time together.  
Be playful about this!

What is one thing you can do in this moment to make your relationship better?

- A word of encouragement
- A hug or touch
- An act of service
- A genuine compliment

## **Take homes for sending messages:**

- Be respectful.
- State needs clearly and directly; don't expect mind reading.
- Be patient with the receiver.

## **Take homes for receiving messages:**

- Focus on what the sender is saying, not on your reaction to it.
- Reflect back the feeling and the content of the message to show understanding.
- Ask for clarification when necessary.

## **Take homes for interacting with your partner during stressful times:**

- Notice when you feeling overwhelmed by emotion and take time to recover.
- Stay in the present moment when addressing problems.
- Don't be afraid of saying no; set healthy boundaries.
- Make sure to include relationship-building activities.