


# The Couples Communication WORKBOOK

by Angela M. Doel, MS

Two white ceramic mugs are positioned side-by-side on a dark, textured surface. The mug on the left contains a list of ten relationship qualities, and the mug on the right contains another list of ten. The background is a blurred, dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a backdrop.

acceptance  
affection  
appreciation  
commitment  
communication  
compromise  
empathy  
forgiveness  
generosity

gratitude  
honesty  
kindness  
openness  
respect  
self-compassion  
sharing  
trust  
vulnerability

Therapeutic Homework Assignments  
to Foster Supportive Relationships

# **The Couples Communication Workbook**

**Therapeutic Homework Assignments to Foster  
Supportive Relationships**

Between Sessions Resources, Inc.  
Norwalk, CT, USA

The Couples Communication Workbook: Therapeutic Homework Assignments to Foster Supportive Relationships by Angela M. Doel, MS

Cover and Interior Design by Mike Canavan

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ISBN: 978-1-947009-10-3

Published by  
Between Sessions Resources  
304 Main Avenue  
Suite 333  
Norwalk, CT 06851

### **About the Author**

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### **About the Series**

*The Couples Communication Workbook* is part of a series of therapy assignment books designed to give therapists and their clients easy access to practical evidence-based psychotherapy tools. For additional workbooks go to [www.CounselingStore.com](http://www.CounselingStore.com).

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## INTRODUCTION

When couples seek help from a therapist or counselor, they are often at a crisis point in their relationship. Typically, something has brought them to a point where they can think of no alternative but to see a professional for guidance. In most cases, the crisis is related to some deep-rooted problems in the relationship, and these can be solved only when each partner commits to finding new ways to identify sources of stress, implement practical solutions for decreasing conflict, deepen emotional intimacy, and enhance understanding and support.

Ongoing homework assignments will be an important way of teaching the skills that will address the crisis while rebuilding a foundation for a happier and more fulfilling relationship. In completing these assignments, couples can rehearse new communication strategies and challenge harmful beliefs, strengthening the insights that surface during counseling sessions. In addition to giving the therapeutic work context and focus, homework provides concrete feedback for the counselor about a client's progress.

This book offers fifty-two worksheets that will help couples learn strategies to manage their emotions in constructive ways, instead of turning to behaviors that erode their relationship. Each worksheet has four sections: Objective, You Should Know, What to Do, and Reflections on This Exercise. The **Objective** states what the couple can expect to have accomplished upon completion of the worksheet. **You Should Know** offers background information about the issue(s) being addressed in the worksheet. **What to Do** features a variety of exercises, including thought-provoking questions to answer, charts to track activities, and questionnaires to complete. In the **Reflections** section, couples are asked to provide feedback on the worksheet, including rating how much the exercise helped them and writing what they learned from the exercise. This section is perhaps the most important part of the worksheet because it helps you and the couple determine any progress or improvement that was made upon completion of the assignment.

Before you begin giving homework, you should do an in-depth assessment of the couple's issues to guide you in your assignments. Your first few assignments will be critical in motivating couples to do the therapeutic work. You may want to have couples put completed assignments in a binder that can serve as a record of what they have learned and achieved in counseling.



# Section One: Relationship Check-In



# Couples Counseling Agreement

My partner and I have agreed to participate in couples counseling. During counseling sessions, we may work on issues such as:

- effective communication
- assertiveness
- listening skills
- acceptance of differences
- anger management
- stress management
- problems in our relationship

I understand that:

- although the focus is to learn new skills to work on relationship problems, it is not possible to guarantee outcomes;
- our relationship is the focus, not individual problems;
- each partner shares responsibility for relationship problems;
- the focus will be on increasing positive behaviors and on translating complaints to requests;
- partners will refrain from blaming, scapegoating, or being hostile toward each other;
- the counselor will not “take sides”;
- there will be respect for each partner’s privacy when homework is completed separately;
- sessions might involve talking about each partner’s family history, important life events, past relationships, and any past or present emotional difficulties;
- couples counseling is most effective when communication is open and honest, and when partners take responsibility for their own feelings and behaviors;
- sessions are kept completely confidential by the counselor, and it is recommended that issues brought up in session remain private between partners rather than discussed with family and friends; and
- if I am having any emotional problems, in addition to relationship issues, the counselor may recommend other kinds of help for me.

I understand and accept this agreement.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Counselor Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Evaluating the Problems in Your Relationship

## Objective

To become aware of the areas in your relationship that might require strengthening.

## You Should Know

Research has shown that couples who consistently check up on their relationships experience improvement in the quality of those relationships. A relationship checkup can identify potential problems before they develop or spiral out of control. Identifying and working on problems is easier during a relationship checkup than if couples wait until there are serious problems to address. Making time for evaluating the areas in your relationship that require strengthening can go a long way toward preventing serious problems down the road.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing. Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 10 = strongly agree. Answer these questions as honestly as possible.

\_\_\_ It is difficult to discuss the conflicts and disagreements we have.

\_\_\_ My partner and I are not on the same page. We are off rhythm, not in sync.

\_\_\_ I wish my partner and I communicated better with each other.

\_\_\_ Issues or problems in our relationship do not easily get resolved.

\_\_\_ In the past week, I experienced no sexual desire for my partner.

\_\_\_ I feel disappointed, discouraged, or indifferent about sex in my relationship.

\_\_\_ I am uncomfortable telling my partner what I like, don't like, and what I would like more or less of when it comes to sex.

\_\_\_ I feel my partner finds me unattractive.

\_\_\_ I cannot be 100 percent myself in my relationship.

\_\_\_ I feel like my partner does not know me well or doesn't really "see" me.

\_\_\_ My partner and I are growing apart, and we no longer share the same values, goals, or priorities.

\_\_\_ I keep very personal things hidden from my partner.

- \_\_\_ I don't confide in my partner.
- \_\_\_ My partner doesn't confide in me.
- \_\_\_ I know my partner is stressed, but they refuse to openly share what is upsetting them.
- \_\_\_ I can't easily forgive my partner when I am hurt or upset.
- \_\_\_ We fail to do the things we need to do to maintain a healthy relationship.
- \_\_\_ We don't engage in outside interests together (for example, outdoor activities or socializing with friends).
- \_\_\_ We can't seem to resolve conflict without hurtful comments or serious arguing.
- \_\_\_ I just don't understand where my partner is coming from.
- \_\_\_ We don't laugh or have fun together.
- \_\_\_ It is difficult for me to demonstrate caring and affection, including using terms of endearment.
- \_\_\_ It is hard for me to apologize to my partner when I am wrong.
- \_\_\_ I don't miss my partner when they are away.
- \_\_\_ I don't feel supported when I have opportunities for growth.
- \_\_\_ I find myself saying hurtful or critical things to my partner.
- \_\_\_ We don't express physical affection to each other (for example, kissing, hugging, holding hands).
- \_\_\_ I don't feel respected and honored.

Now add up your score: \_\_\_\_\_

- If you scored 181 or more points, there are definitely areas in your relationship that could be strengthened to enhance your relationship.
- If you scored 101–180, there might be areas that require some focus to strengthen your relationship.
- If you scored between 28–100 points, there might be one or two areas that require work, but overall, your relationship is healthy.

Answer the following questions. How many days has it been since you and your partner:

Had a serious argument? \_\_\_\_\_

Went on a real date? \_\_\_\_\_

Took a walk together? \_\_\_\_\_

Did an important errand together? \_\_\_\_\_

Visited with friends? \_\_\_\_\_

Had a serious discussion about your relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

Had sex? \_\_\_\_\_

Made an important decision together? \_\_\_\_\_

Laughed hard at something together? \_\_\_\_\_

Made a major purchase together? \_\_\_\_\_

Did any of these answers surprise you? Explain.

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List the top three areas in your relationship you feel need work.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Describe challenges you might experience in strengthening these three areas.

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Describe recent stressors that have contributed to the problems you and your partner are experiencing.

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Describe your current demands (for example, childcare, working full-time or multiple jobs).

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List five resources and/or strengths you bring to the relationship.

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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4. 

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5. 

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Are there factors that prevent you from using your strengths and/or resources? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Recognizing Areas for Change

## Objective

To be aware of the areas where you can make changes in order to improve your relationship.

## You Should Know

The best way to “fix” your relationship is to look at how you can make improvements. When you improve who you are and how you show up (your attitudes, behaviors, and so forth), you will contribute to improving your relationship. Certainly, a strong relationship is the result of the things both you and your partner are doing, but there is nothing you can do to force your partner to change. That is why it is best to focus on the one thing you can control—yourself.

Take care of yourself, and find ways to uplift, energize, and recharge yourself. The more you work on yourself, the stronger your relationship will be.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

What would you like to change most about yourself?

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How can you achieve this change?

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What positive qualities and/or strengths do you bring to the relationship?

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What initially attracted you to your partner?

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What do you still find attractive?

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What are some habits or behaviors your partner finds particularly irritating about you?

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Why do you want to stay together?

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How would you feel if you were not together?

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What was the best thing you and your partner did together in the last month?

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What was the hardest thing you did together in the last month?

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What is the best thing about your relationship? What do you do (or not do) that contributes to this being the best thing?

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What is the worst thing about your relationship? What do you do (or not do) that contributes to this being the worst thing?

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What can you do to improve or change the worst thing?

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What are the best things about your sex life?

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What are the most difficult things about your sex life?

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How can you help change or improve the most difficult things?

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List four things you find difficult about being with your partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

List four things you enjoy doing socially *without* your partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

List four things you have difficulty doing socially with your partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

List four things you enjoy doing around the house by yourself.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

List four things you have difficulty doing around the house with your partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Whose idea was it to get help with the relationship? Why?

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What have you done together or individually to improve the relationship?

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How much are you willing to work to improve the relationship?

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What changes do you want to see in the relationship?

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What are you willing to change?

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What would you like your partner to change?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# What Do You Want from Your Relationship?

## Objective

To identify your relationship wants and desires.

## You Should Know

You might be able to describe what you *don't* want in your relationship, but are you aware of what you *do* want? It is often easy to focus on problems or what is “wrong” in the relationship. As a result, when you communicate with your partner, you may find it far easier to complain or express your dissatisfaction, rather than clearly state or ask for what you actually desire.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

The following list includes wants and desires that a large number of people have identified as very important to them. Read the statements and rate the importance of each desire on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = not at all important, to 10 = extremely important. Once you have reviewed each item, rank your top ten most important wants or desires.

### I have a desire to:

Feel connected through talking.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Feel connected through sharing recreation/fun times together.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Experience touch in a non-sexual way.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Have sex.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive verbal tenderness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive physical tenderness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported as I live by society's laws and rules.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported as I live by the rules or tenets of my religion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Know we'll stay together and feel secure in love.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Know we'll stay together and feel financially secure.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Feel accepted and valued for who I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Feel accepted and valued for what I do.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Feel safe when I am vulnerable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be included in decisions that affect my life or relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Experience agreement and harmony in decision making.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Know that my partner needs me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported in my desire to give money away.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported in my desire to give gifts to others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported in my desire to serve others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive genuine praise and validation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported in my desire to have alone time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be physically attracted to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Know my partner is honest and trustworthy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be supported when I help younger people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive gifts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive help when I need it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Receive genuine appreciation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**I have a desire for my partner to:**

Develop a future plan for our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be faithful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Become emotionally healthy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Maintain a mutually-vibrant spiritual relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Apologize and seek forgiveness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Resolve differences/conflicts/arguments with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Engage in mutually-satisfying communication.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Effectively cope with crises and stress.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Understand me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Demonstrate a willingness to change (flexibility).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Work as a team to raise our children (if applicable).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Be passionate and romantic.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Socially connect with others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

What are your top ten desires?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Did any of your partner's answers surprise you? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying Strengths in Your Relationship

## Objective

To improve your relationship by becoming aware of the areas of strength you each bring to it.

## You Should Know

Research indicates if you understand your own strengths, you are better able to cope with stress and meet the demands of daily life. When you are aware of your own strengths, you experience a boost in confidence and an increase in positive emotions – qualities that can enhance your relationship.

Identifying your partner’s strengths will also benefit your relationship. When you and your partner are aware of what you each bring to the relationship, it will be easier to build a foundation for open communication and successful conflict resolution.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate yourself and your partner on your areas of strength on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = needs work, and 5 = very strong. Add any strengths you or your partner have that are not on this list.

When you are done, identify strengths you both possess and discuss how you might use your individual strengths to enhance your relationship.

Areas of strength	Me	My partner
Expresses feelings openly		
Listens without judging		
Manages conflict effectively		
Budgets and manages money well		
Easily expresses affection		
Makes decisions effectively		
Willingness to find solutions to problems		
Works hard and/or is employed		
Maintains relationships with family and friends		



Willingness to grow and evolve together		
Parenting skills ( <i>if applicable</i> )		
Spiritual/religious beliefs		
Involved in community activities or hobbies		
Thoughtfulness and consideration		
Playfulness and humor		
Trustworthy		
Respectful		
Willingness to be vulnerable		
Optimism; has a positive point of view		
Deals effectively with stress		
Organized		
Flexibility and openness to change		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		

Your five main strengths:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Your partner's five main strengths:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What five strengths do you think your partner would say you possess?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What are your five main strengths as a couple?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Looking at the strengths you have identified for yourself, are there areas where you can improve?

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Are there areas where you can improve as a couple?

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What, if anything, surprised you about your partner's responses?

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In what areas did you disagree with your partner?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying Your Communication Style

## Objective

To identify which style you typically use when communicating with your partner.

## You Should Know

There are four basic styles of communication. Even though you might use different styles in different situations, usually you will fall back on one particular style.

- **Passive communication** prioritizes the needs, wants, and feelings of others—even at your own expense. Your communication tends to be inadequate and ineffective, and you do not appear to be confident or self-assured. Other people may take advantage of you because you do not stand up for yourself.
- **Aggressive communication** occurs when only your needs, wants, and feelings matter. You typically ignore other peoples' needs. You might use bullying or a loud or overbearing manner. Criticism, humiliation, disrespectful language, and/or domination with frequent interruptions are tools designed to control conversations.
- **Passive-aggressiveness communication** is the tendency to engage in indirect expressions of hostility through subtle insults, sullen behavior, and stubbornness. Sarcasm is often used as a way of masking your true feelings and opinions. You might use the “silent treatment” to try to make people feel guilty in order to get what you want.
- **Assertive communication** is the ability to express your opinions in an open, honest, and direct way. You take responsibility for yourself without judging or blaming other people. You express your ideas in a respectful manner, without being too aggressive or too passive. You use positive and courteous language. Research indicates that communicating in an assertive manner reduces stress, depression, and anxiety, and improves your self-esteem.

Understanding these four styles will help you effectively respond in difficult conversations with your partner. You will also become more aware of when you are not communicating assertively. Once you are aware of your own communication style, it is easier to identify areas that require improvement.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

To identify your style of communication, mark the answers that are true for you most of the time.

## Section A

\_\_\_ I allow others to deliberately or inadvertently infringe on my rights.

\_\_\_ I have a hard time expressing my feelings, needs, or opinions.

\_\_\_ I tend to speak softly or apologetically.

\_\_\_ I have trouble making eye contact.

\_\_\_ I often feel anxious because life seems out of control.

\_\_\_ I feel stuck and hopeless.

\_\_\_ My needs are not being met.

\_\_\_ Other people never seem to consider my feelings.

### **Section B**

\_\_\_ I tend to dominate conversations.

\_\_\_ I'm usually right.

\_\_\_ It's usually someone's else's fault if things go wrong.

\_\_\_ I tend to explode or blow up during conversations because other people frustrate me.

\_\_\_ I prefer to dominate others and be the "boss."

\_\_\_ People owe me, and I let them know it.

\_\_\_ People seem angry or resentful after talking to me.

### **Section C**

\_\_\_ I avoid confrontation at all costs.

\_\_\_ It's difficult for me to admit that I'm angry.

\_\_\_ I will act as if I'm happy even though I'm furious.

\_\_\_ People tell me I'm too sarcastic.

\_\_\_ I enjoy annoying other people when I'm angry with them.

\_\_\_ I feel powerless when I deal with other people.

### **Section D**

\_\_\_ I clearly state my wants and needs in a respectful and appropriate way.

\_\_\_ I use "I" statements and clearly express my feelings.

\_\_\_ I listen without interrupting.

\_\_\_ I maintain good eye contact most of the time.

\_\_\_ I feel competent, in control, and connected to others.

\_\_\_ I don't allow others to control or manipulate me.

\_\_\_ I am responsible for getting my needs met in a respectful manner.

If you chose most of your answers in section A, you are a passive communicator. Section B, you tend to communicate aggressively. Section C, you are a passive-aggressive communicator. Section D, you tend to communicate assertively.

What is your primary communication style? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying and Solving Problems in Communication

## Objective

To strengthen your relationship through effective communication.

## You Should Know

Problems with communication have a significant negative effect on relationship satisfaction. Poor communication is one of the most frequent and damaging relationship difficulties and is often why couples seek help from therapists. These behaviors contribute to poor communication:

- Complaining
- Blaming
- Frequently using sarcasm
- Stonewalling (acting detached, cold, distant, or indifferent)
- Criticizing
- Being judgmental
- Mocking or belittling
- Being overly defensive

When you avoid poor communication behaviors, and you express yourself to your partner in constructive and healthy ways, you deepen your connection and strengthen the relationship. Each of you will feel understood, and when problems arise, your connection will remain strong.

Good communication does not have to involve agreement. You and your partner can respectfully agree to disagree, understanding where each of you is coming from. Good communication promotes better understanding, acceptance, and collaboration—instead of constant disagreement and conflict.

It is particularly important during conflict or times of stress that you and your partner slow down and really listen. Quickly responding to assumed (rather than actual) messages leads to ineffective and unhelpful communication, often escalating conflict.

Consider the following tips to have calm and respectful conversations:

### Speaker

Be specific.

Be brief.

Be as positive as possible.

Use “I” statements.

### Listener

Listen attentively; do not interrupt.

Reflect what your partner is saying or feeling.

Summarize what you think was said.

Ask for additional information.

Be clear about what is helpful.

Don't counterattack or be defensive.

Avoid "you" statements.

Clarify without excusing.

Avoid blame, insults, accusations.

Find points of agreement.

Avoid labels or absolute statements.

Apologize or express regret, if appropriate.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate each communication problem on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = this is not a problem in our relationship, and 10 = this is a major problem in our relationship.

My partner:

\_\_\_\_\_ criticizes me frequently.

\_\_\_\_\_ finds fault with everything I do.

\_\_\_\_\_ offers advice when I don't ask for it (instead of listening to what I have to say).

\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't listen to me.

\_\_\_\_\_ tends to talk too much.

\_\_\_\_\_ frequently yells or screams.

\_\_\_\_\_ avoids conflict.

\_\_\_\_\_ interrupts.

\_\_\_\_\_ apologizes too much.

\_\_\_\_\_ often says "you always" or "you never."

\_\_\_\_\_ constantly nags.

\_\_\_\_\_ has to have the last word.

\_\_\_\_\_ gives me the silent treatment.

\_\_\_\_\_ insists that they are always right.

\_\_\_\_\_ shows very little interest in me.



\_\_\_\_\_ assumes or jumps to conclusions.

\_\_\_\_\_ enjoys arguing or debating.

\_\_\_\_\_ brings up issues at inopportune times, like when one of us is angry, stressed, tired, or hungry.

Add up your score: \_\_\_\_\_

If you scored between 18–70, you might have slight problems in communication.

If you scored between 71–130, you have moderate problems with communication.

If you scored more than 131 points, there are several problems in communication to address.

Schedule a fifteen-to-thirty-minute chat with each other, twice a week for one month. During your time together, eliminate all distractions and focus on each other. You might begin with “safe” conversations before moving onto more controversial topics. Note the date and time, and the topic discussed, and rate each chat on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = it really didn’t go well, and 10 = it deepened our connection. Note your and your partner’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during each chat.

Date/time	Topic	How did it go?	Thoughts, feelings, behaviors


Did you find the communication tips helpful when practicing this exercise? Why or why not?

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What, if anything surprised you during this exercise?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Does Technology Interfere with Your Relationship?

## Objective

To minimize any negative effects that technology may be having on your relationship.

## You Should Know

Technology has changed the way we live, including our intimate relationships. With the increased use of email, texting, instant messaging, and social media, couples are on their devices more than ever. In some ways this change has been for the better, as it is easier for people to be connected and to communicate their thoughts and needs. But in other ways, technology can get in the way of authentic communication and intimacy.

Many couples struggle to find a balance. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, one in four cell phone owners in a relationship found their partner too distracted by their cell phone. Nearly one in ten had argued with a partner about spending too much time on their devices. Even those who didn't report addictive use still complained that their partner was frequently distracted by sounds or notifications, like a dog salivating to Pavlov's ringing bell.

Another study of 143 married women, conducted by Brandon McDaniel, PhD, a professor at Penn State University, concluded the following:

- 62% said technology interferes with their leisure time together.
- 40% said their partner gets distracted by the TV during a conversation.
- 35% said their partner will respond to a notification even in the middle of a conversation.
- 33% said their partner checks the phone during mealtimes they spend together.
- 25% said their partner actively texts other people during the couple's face-to-face conversations.

Do these patterns sound familiar?

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down the devices and applications you use on a regular basis and estimate how much time you spend per day on each device, noting the mode of communication (for example, text, email, IM, social media, etc.). For help in assessing your device time, you can install a time-tracking app such as [Moment](#) or [\(OFFTIME\)](#).

Device/app/mode of communication	Time spent daily

Now, write down the devices your partner uses and estimate how much time they spend on that device.

Device/app/mode of communication	Time spent daily

What positive effects does technology have on your relationship (for example, convenient planning, sharing thoughts and feelings, sharing news)?

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What are the negative effects of technology use (for example, lack of face-to-face time; difficulty having a conversation without interruption; irritability, depression, or moodiness)?

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Make a plan to sit down with your partner to discuss how you both can change your use of technology. For example;

- Share, in person, your concerns with your partner. Resist the urge to hide behind the “safety” and “anonymity” of texting or emails.
- Make a plan to reduce time on devices—set a goal of limiting tech use to a specific number of minutes per day. Then stick to it.
- Alternatively, carefully schedule in your use of technology (for example, 7:00 to 7:15; Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram)
- Install a blocking app that restricts your access to social media.
- Don’t text during meals.
- Shut off all devices an hour before bedtime. Use that time to talk to each other, and be sure to make eye contact.
- Schedule other device-free time together to share your thoughts and feelings.
- Make time to be in nature, walking, hiking, doing shared activities.
- Introduce a weekly device-free romantic “date night.”
- Take a meditation or yoga class together.
- Go to the gym.

Add your own ideas here:

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Setting limits and finding alternatives to technology is something you can do together. Make compromises if necessary; that is, if you must keep your phone on because your kids might call, do not take any other calls or texts during that time.

Which alternatives seem the easiest and most fun for you? Explain.

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Which alternatives seem the most challenging? Explain.

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Of the challenging alternatives you identified, which one can you commit to trying within the next week or so?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Is Your Relationship Affected by Your Deep-Seated Fears?

## Objective

To minimize overreacting by recognizing when disagreements are fueled by your deep-seated fears.

## You Should Know

All couples disagree at times. If you and your partner are like most couples, you have many kinds of disagreements. Many may be minor, but some may be so hurtful that you might think your relationship is over. Sometimes seemingly petty problems become blown out of proportion because they trigger deep-seated fears. Researchers have determined that there are five core fears:

**Extinction**—the fear of ceasing to physically exist. The fear of extinction is not simply a fear of death, but a fear of “not being.”

**Mutilation**—the fear of losing a body part or the thought of having the body’s boundaries violated, or of losing the integrity of natural functions.

**Loss of autonomy**—the fear of being immobilized, paralyzed, restricted, enveloped, overwhelmed, entrapped, imprisoned, smothered, or otherwise controlled by circumstances beyond your control.

**Separation**—the fear of abandonment, rejection, and loss of connectedness. This fear refers to feeling unwanted, disrespected, or devalued.

**Death of self**—the fear of humiliation, shame, or any other mechanism of profound self-disapproval. This loss of self or identity may result in total disintegration of one’s perceived lovability, capability, and worthiness.

Understanding how disagreements are related to your deep-seated fears can help keep you from overreacting to small problems. Most disagreements can be handled by a simple problem-solving process, an agreement by both people to work on the problem, and by developing an attitude of compassion toward yourself and your partner.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

When you have an argument or when you simply feel critical of your partner, write down what you are feeling. Then see if you can identify whether a deep-seated fear is associated with your feelings.

Describe the problem	What triggered the problem?	What are my immediate feelings?	What deeper fears come up for me?

Looking back at what you have written, do you see any patterns to the disagreements you are having with your partner or partner?

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If one or more deep-seated fears are associated with your problems, where do you think that fear originated?

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What do you think would happen if you share your deep-seated fears with your partner?

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What can you do to address your deep-seated fears outside of your relationship?

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How can you support your partner in addressing deep-seated fears? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Is Stress Negatively Affecting Your Relationship?

## Objective

To more effectively manage stress that fuels problems in your relationship by recognizing its sources.

## You Should Know

In today's world, it is virtually impossible to avoid stress. Stressors are events that create emotional and physical reactions. Whether a stressor is positive (for example, a job promotion or the birth of a child) or negative (for example, a major illness or job loss), it can affect your relationship with your partner. Stress is a leading cause of interpersonal tension and dysfunction in relationships. When stress levels are high or chronic, physical (headaches, stomach distress), psychological (anger, anxiety), or relational issues (disconnection, conflict) may emerge.

Research has indicated that high levels of stress strain intimate relationships. The greater the stress levels, the more strongly partners react to the normal ups and downs of life. In other words, when stress levels are high, perceived slights impact couples more intensely. You might snap at your partner or lose patience much quicker, and over time, these microaggressions erode relationships. Research also suggests that high stress levels make it more difficult to effectively communicate and resolve conflict. Couples are more likely to evaluate their relationship negatively when they are experiencing prolonged exposure to stress. Lovability, capability, and worthiness are also negatively impacted by long-term stress, further increasing strain on relationships.

Effectively managing stress begins with identifying the sources of stress, assessing your ability to control or change the situation, and staying connected to your partner as you discuss healthy ways to cope. There are two basic ways to cope with stress:

**Eliminate or manage the stressor.** Some stressors represent things you can control (for example, working too many hours). In some cases, it is possible to make choices that actually eliminate the stressor (for example, finding a new job or decreasing your hours).

**Change your reaction to stress.** When a stressor cannot be eliminated, it is important to address how you react in response to stress. Learning and using coping strategies can assist you in responding to stress in healthier ways.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate yourself on the following statements on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = don't agree at all, and 10 = strongly agree.

\_\_\_\_\_ I worry about money all the time.

\_\_\_\_\_ Parenting is a major source of stress for me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I don't get along with my in-laws.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner and I rarely communicate.

\_\_\_\_\_ Arguing is a frequent source of stress for us.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel sexually frustrated.

\_\_\_\_\_ My job is extremely stressful.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am dealing with a serious and/or ongoing health challenge.

\_\_\_\_\_ I recently lost my job, or I am having a difficult time finding a job.

\_\_\_\_\_ We have recently experienced a death in our family.

\_\_\_\_\_ Addiction is an ongoing issue within our family.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Based on your answers, describe any problems you are currently experiencing.

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What, if any, additional sources of stress might be contributing to these problems?

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Can you control or change the stressful situations? If yes, describe what you can do.

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If there are issues that are difficult or impossible to change, what can you do to cope?

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What can you do stay connected as a couple as you create healthy ways to cope with stress?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Are Financial Problems Affecting Your Relationship?

## Objective

To use productive strategies for resolving communication problems involving finances.

## You Should Know

According to research, money is the primary issue that cause couples distress; more than one-third of couples reported that financial issues were a major source of conflict. Arguments about money tend to be more intense than other types of conflicts in relationships, and they are likely to remain unresolved unless they are approached directly.

The source of conflict between couples is often twofold:

- a lack of knowledge about the other’s values and beliefs about money and financial management.
- a lack of communication and collaboration between partners.

In order to achieve a healthier financial life together, it is important to identify your own values and beliefs about money, which are usually grounded in what you learned in your family of origin. People’s attitudes about spending or saving, sharing or not sharing, acquiring debt, investments, and so on are often not even conscious. Financial values awareness will help you make wise choices as a couple. Such awareness can then lead to improved communication around problems and create a more team-oriented approach to finances.

With patience and practice, you and your partner can sort out similarities and differences and learn to approach your finances maturely and with mutual respect.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

In exploring these questions, go into as much detail as you can.

What are your values and beliefs about money?

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What did you notice about how money was managed in your family of origin?

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What are your beliefs about spending versus saving?

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Do you believe debt is okay, necessary, or completely unacceptable?

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What are your financial goals?

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What are your fears about money?

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What are your beliefs about who should make the financial decisions in a family? How?

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Next, take some time to assess the nature of your current communication about money in your relationship.

How often do you communicate about financial decisions? What happens when you do?

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Who generally makes the decisions about money?

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Are you a two-earner couple? If so, does one of you earn significantly more than the other? What conflicts, if any, does that create?

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Do you have a joint bank account or individual bank accounts? \_\_\_\_\_

Is this working for you? Explain.

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What is your money management style as a couple? Does one of you do all the tasks (balancing checkbook, doing taxes, etc.) or are they shared? If so, how?

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What is the primary source of conflict involving finances in your relationship?

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If you are a blended family, how are financial decisions made in regard to your ex-partners and/or stepchildren?

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What, if any, other issues would you like to bring to light about your financial conflicts?

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Here are some tips about how to improve money-related issues in your relationship. Put a check next to the ones you and your partner agree are most important to try.

Set up a regular time to review bills, talk about expenses, and discuss any investments.

Some experts suggest scheduling a fun activity afterward, so you have a pleasant event to look forward to.

Make a list together of what tasks need to be done.

Discuss how to divide these tasks; for example, by taking turns.

Decide whether you want to be on a budget; if so, describe specifically how it will work:

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Choose a calm time to share your worries and concerns openly and honestly, rather than waiting for a disagreement to occur and risk shouting or arguing. Write down your concerns in advance if that helps you stay grounded and clear.

Avoid blaming and criticizing; even if one partner is more “irresponsible” than the other, it is affecting both of you. Find a way to become good problem solvers together.



If it is too hard to discuss money without getting into an argument, perhaps there is too much resentment built up. You might consider discussing these issues with a financial counselor.

Next, respond to the following questions.

Do you need to learn the basics of how money is managed (bank accounts, savings, investments, loans, debt, etc.)? What can you do to be more financially literate (read a book, see a financial advisor, take a class)?

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Complete this sentence: "If I could change one thing about the way I handle money matters, it would be ..."

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What are your hopes, goals, and dreams regarding finances? Plan to work as a couple toward achieving them. Be creative.

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying Shared Values

## Objective

To strengthen your relationship by identifying values you share with your partner.

## You Should Know

You and your partner each bring your own values to the relationship: the principles, goals, and beliefs that shape choices, actions, decisions, and motivations. The way you communicate about values impacts your relationship and your future. You might not discuss conflicting values until a situation makes it necessary (for instance, discussing parenting values when a baby arrives).

In successful relationships, partners determine that their conflicting values are acceptable or tolerable and are worth the effort. They communicate in ways that are respectful and supportive of each other's values while focusing on what is best for their relationship. They encourage each other to reach individual goals, instead of trying to change your partner.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Using the following list, determine which values are most important to you. As you review the list, consider these questions:

- What really matters to you?
- What sort of person do you want to be?
- What personal strengths and qualities do you want to develop?

Rate each value based on its importance: E = extremely important, I = important, and N = not important.

\_\_\_\_\_ Acceptance/self-acceptance

\_\_\_\_\_ Assertiveness

\_\_\_\_\_ Authenticity

\_\_\_\_\_ Cooperation and collaboration

\_\_\_\_\_ Caring, compassion, and kindness

\_\_\_\_\_ Family

\_\_\_\_\_ Contribution and generosity

\_\_\_\_\_ Furthering my education

\_\_\_\_\_ Courage

\_\_\_\_\_ Creativity

\_\_\_\_\_ Curiosity and discovery

\_\_\_\_\_ Dedication and commitment

- |                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| _____ Excitement and adventure        | _____ Fairness and justice            |
| _____ Faith and spirituality          | _____ Flexibility                     |
| _____ Freedom and independence        | _____ Friendship/belonging            |
| _____ Forgiveness                     | _____ Fun and pleasure                |
| _____ Gratitude and appreciation      | _____ Health (physical and mental)    |
| _____ Honesty/trust                   | _____ Love/romance                    |
| _____ Mindfulness                     | _____ Order and structure             |
| _____ Persistence and resilience      | _____ Personal growth and development |
| _____ Career/professional development | _____ Recreation and leisure          |
| _____ Respect/self-respect            | _____ Responsibility                  |
| _____ Safety and protection           | _____ Sensuality and sexuality        |
| _____ Supportiveness                  | _____ Wealth                          |
| _____ Success/achievement             | _____ Adventure/travel                |
| _____ Balance                         | _____ Community involvement           |
| _____ Joy/happiness                   | _____ Humor/laughter                  |
| _____ Leadership                      | _____ Peace/harmony                   |
| _____ Popularity/recognition/status   | _____ Reputation                      |
| _____ Stability/security              | _____ Other: _____                    |

What are your three most important values?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Compare your answers. Which values do you and your partner share?

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Did this exercise help you communicate your values and goals to each other? Explain.

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Which values do you and your partner agree are the most important for a happy and healthy relationship?

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Of your conflicting values, which are you willing to support, tolerate, and respect? Explain.

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What are some ways you can you support your partner's different values and goals, while remaining true to your own?

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Did either of you identify values that the other finds unacceptable or intolerable? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Section Two: Decrease Conflict and Bickering



# How Do Relationship Conflicts Affect Your Self-Image?

## Objective

To recognize how your self-image is negatively impacted by relationship conflicts.

## You Should Know

Ideally, relationships bring out the best in each partner, offering nourishment and support, contributing to each person's well-being. When couples feel positively about themselves or have high esteem, romantic satisfaction may be less elusive. When you and your partner's self-images are positive, your sex life may improve, conflict is easier to resolve, and you experience presence, vulnerability, and a sense of closeness.

Relationships can also negatively affect self-image and result in negative self-statements and painful emotions. This can be a damaging cycle because people with low self-esteem have been found to be more likely to remain in unhealthy relationships. Not only do they stay in the relationship, but research has shown that partners with diminished self-esteem tend to avoid confronting problems or conflicts. That avoidance may reflect feelings of insecurity, leading to withdrawal from conflicts that might be resolved through more open, transparent communication. Conflicts in a relationship are inevitable, but if conflicts repeatedly trigger negative emotions and self-statements, it's time to determine how you can break this cycle.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Think about the last time you had an argument, and circle the statements you made to yourself afterward. Then go back and look at the negative emotions that were triggered.

<b>Self-statement</b>	<b>Emotion</b>
I'm simply not good enough. I'm basically incompetent.	Inadequate
I'm the problem because something is wrong with me.	Defective
I'm the victim here; I can't do anything to change this. I am controlled.	Powerless
I'm just not a great partner. I don't live up to expectations. I fall short.	Failure
I'm not important, and it seems everyone else is better than me.	Inferior
My partner doesn't love me. There's no romance between us.	Unloved

My partner doesn't want me or need me. The desire is gone.	Rejected
I will eventually be alone; my partner is not committed to me.	Abandoned
We are emotionally detached, separated, disconnected.	Disconnected
My partner withholds affection/attention. I don't get what I want.	Cheated
I am unhappy in this relationship. I feel no joy.	Dissatisfied
I am useless and offer no value to my partner.	Worthless
My partner doesn't accept me for who I am.	Unaccepted
I am constantly judged, and my partner has negative opinions of me.	Judged
I receive no attention from my partner. I feel neglected.	Ignored
I am irrelevant and of low priority to my partner.	Unimportant
This relationship is destructive and I have no dignity or self-respect.	Humiliated

List other self-statements and emotions you have had after a conflict with a partner:

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Looking back at your responses, do you see any patterns in your self-evaluations or negative self-statements?

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How are your negative evaluations of yourself impacting your self-image as well as your behavior?

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What can you do to address your negative self-evaluations and self-statements?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# How Do You Know When You Cross the Line?

## Objective

To approach conflict in healthier ways by identifying harmful or verbally abusive patterns in your communication patterns.

## You Should Know

When you mock or put down your partner, or you are critical or manipulative, you are undermining your relationship, and it may be difficult to repair the damage. The roots of such behaviors are often complex but can typically be traced back to childhood experiences of having been verbally abused or criticized by a parent or caretaker.

We tend to carry into adulthood the same styles of communication we learned as children. However, that's not *always* the case. Sometimes people are experiencing tremendous stress in their current lives and feel overwhelmed and angry and unwittingly take it out on their partner.

Harsh and abusive words can destroy a relationship. It can intimidate your partner and make them withdraw. Ultimately, this kind of behavior will not be tolerated, leading to the end of the relationship.

Habitual ways of communicating can be hard to undo, but with awareness and practice, you can improve.

**Notice when you feel anger or resentment arising in your body.** If you feel you are about to say something you might regret, practice using the STOP technique developed by author Carla Naumburg, PhD:

- Stop what you're doing.
- Take a breath.
- Observe what you're doing.
- Proceed with a healthier alternative.

**Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements.** For instance, "I feel annoyed that we are going to be late," versus "You're always late; you must be doing it to annoy me."

**Use empathy.** Put yourself in your partner's shoes and try to imagine what they might be feeling at that moment.

**Apologize.** Learn to say a simple "I'm sorry" for past hurts and for those that might arise, even if your partner might not be ready to forgive you.

**Forgive yourself.** Accept that you are imperfect. Practice self-compassion toward the part of yourself that is trying to learn new skills.

**Practice “active listening.”** Learn how to be a better, more open-minded, open-hearted listener.

### **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

First, look at the ways in which people can cross the line verbally. As you look at this list, write down examples of what you might have done or said in the past. Be honest with yourself, even if it causes you some regret, guilt, or shame.

**Calling your partner names.** Have you used words aimed at your partner such as “jerk,” “stupid,” “idiot,” “good-for-nothing,” or other, even more harmful names, including swearing or cursing? Note them here.

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**Blaming your partner.** If you find that you frequently say such things as “It’s all your fault,” or “If it weren’t for you, I’d ...,” or “I don’t like fighting but you’re the one who provoked me,” note them here.

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**Criticizing your partner.** Maybe you frequently point out your partner’s perceived flaws. Do you say things like, “You can’t do anything right!” “You’re a slob,” “You are so scatterbrained, no wonder you can’t find the keys again,” and so on. Note any patterns of criticizing your partner that you can recall.

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**Being condescending.** You know what it’s like when someone is condescending toward you—they are sarcastic, or patronizing, or show disdain. Condescension can be subtle but, bottom line, it makes someone else feel bad. For example, “I’ll say it again, so you have a *chance* of understanding me,” “Can you *be* any slower? You’re always making us late!” “Really? You’re wearing *that*?” Note any examples of condescending or sarcastic things you have said to your partner.

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**Humiliating your partner.** This form of verbal abuse can seriously undermine your partner’s confidence and self-esteem. Are any of these themes familiar? “You aren’t even worth paying attention to, you’re so miserable,” “Who would want you? You’re fatter than that six-hundred-pound guy on TV,” “You don’t even know how to stand up for yourself, you’re so weak.” Note your own statements.

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**Manipulating your partner.** This is a way of trying to control your partner indirectly. Perhaps you recognize yourself in the following statements: “If you loved me, you’d have sex with me,” “If you don’t make me dinner, it proves you don’t care,” “Sure, I’ll give you a break if you stop talking back to me,” and so on. Note your own.

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**Acting jealous or accusatory.** Perhaps you’ve found yourself accusing your partner of things they may or may not have done, things that might make you jealous or envious. Do you accuse them, as in, “You don’t want me to look at your phone—what are you hiding?” “Why were you late getting home for the third time in a row?” “I saw you talking to that good-looking person at the party—are you cheating on me?” Note any times when you may have been accusatory toward your partner.

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**Isolating or withdrawing.** Perhaps instead of being verbally critical or accusatory, you do things like refusing to talk to your partner, storming out of the house, or avoiding answering texts or phone calls. Note times when you may have crossed the line in ways like these.

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**Threatening your partner.** This form of verbal abuse is a strong sign that you are trying to control your partner. Threatening includes saying things like “You better do what I say or I’ll walk out and never come back,” “If you keep at it, I can’t be responsible for what might happen next,” “Shut up or you’re going to get it worse,” and so on. Note any threats you may have made to your partner—and please consider finding a mental health professional who can help you learn healthier ways of communicating before things get even worse.

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**Important:** Verbal threats can often lead to physical threats or physical violence. If you’ve ever hurt your partner physically, you must seek professional help as soon as possible. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline 24/7 at 1-800-799-7233 and stop the cycle.

Over the next two weeks, notice how you communicate with your partner, and complete the following chart.

Date	Situation/conflict	What I said	What could I have done differently?	What can I do in the future?

It is normal for old, habitual ways of communicating to come up when you're learning new skills. Referring to the chart, describe a situation in which you noticed you backed off from using harsh words toward your partner. What was difficult about that? What was easy?

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Consider your own upbringing and the roots of your tendency to use words harshly. Be specific.

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What positive communication skill would you like to practice using more? Note it here, then be specific about when and how you would like to practice this skill.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# What Troubles Your Partner?

## Objective

To make it easier to see how each partner's problems can affect your relationship.

## You Should Know

It is sometimes difficult to empathize with a partner who has made you angry or disappointed you. But understanding how another person feels does not negate your feelings. Understanding your partner makes it easier for both of you to see how each person's problems can lead to choices or behaviors that affect your relationship.

These suggestions can help you better understand your partner and what they might be experiencing—and to care for yourself:

**Show support and empathy.** Your partner might worry you will not love or desire them if they are experiencing problems. Your partner might even fear you no longer want to be married to them. It is important to let your partner know you are here for and love them. This reassurance will go a long way toward strengthening your relationship. Alternatively, your negative reactions can potentially exacerbate problems and lead to feelings of hopelessness.

**Educate yourself.** If your partner has problems that you are confused about, learn more. The best plan of action is to seek out psychological or medical professionals (if required), literature, or online information. Your partner's problems might be off-putting and confusing. You might assume your partner is uncaring, distant, lazy, distracted, irritable, or irrational. Some of these "character flaws" might actually be the consequence of issues your partner is experiencing.

**Do not become an enabler or a therapist.** You might need to seek outside assistance from a therapist, mediator, religious leader, or other professional to help with your own coping and communication with your partner. You and your partner will gain perspective and guidance, and establish appropriate expectations and healthy boundaries. Your role is to offer love, support, and compassion to your partner. Your partner is responsible for taking the steps to solve their problems so they can be healthy and productive as partners and in other areas of life.

**Practice self-care.** Self-care is not selfish—it is a necessity. If you fail to focus on your own health, you are at risk of developing physical and emotional problems. Get enough sleep, do some regular physical activity, eat well, spend time with friends or loved ones, and engage in activities or hobbies you enjoy.

Reflect on how you are responding to your partner's problems. Are you stepping up in a way you are proud of—or are you avoiding doing your part to help your partner, your family, and yourself? Successful couples do not allow problems to destroy their relationship but instead view these issues as challenges to manage and overcome. Each partner must be responsible for themselves and have a healthy response and reaction to stress, challenges, and unexpected or problematic situations.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Describe the problems your partner has:

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How do those problems affect you?

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How are you managing these problems?

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Is your partner effectively managing these problems? Explain.

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Describe how these problems have impacted your relationship.

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Referring to the earlier suggestions, what can you do to better understand what your partner might be experiencing? What can you do to manage your emotions and reactions? Be specific.

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Confronting Issues in Your Relationship

## Objective

To identify issues that are high priority and relatively easy to change.

## You Should Know

When working on your relationship it is a good idea to remember that “success breeds success.” With this in mind, use this worksheet to decide which issues in your relationship are important to both of you, and can also be addressed relatively easily.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate each issue on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = low priority, and 5 = high priority. Then, rate each issue on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = easy to change, and 5 = difficult to change. Brainstorm possible solutions.

### Your Relationship Issues

Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Priority \_\_\_\_\_ Ease of change \_\_\_\_\_

Possible solutions?

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Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Priority \_\_\_\_\_ Ease of change \_\_\_\_\_

Possible solutions?

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Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Priority \_\_\_\_\_ Ease of change \_\_\_\_\_

Possible solutions?

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Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Priority \_\_\_\_\_ Ease of change \_\_\_\_\_

Possible solutions?

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Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Priority \_\_\_\_\_ Ease of change \_\_\_\_\_

Possible solutions?

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Discuss a common issue that is a high priority and is relatively easy to change. Did you and your partner's answers differ greatly, or were they more similar than you expected? Explain.

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## Reflections on this Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Dealing with Frustration

## Objective

To manage frustration in healthier ways by identifying its causes.

## You Should Know

If you are frustrated, you might struggle to explain yourself to your partner, or you might avoid saying what you really want to say. Over time, your frustration might lead to tension and stress, diminishing communication and eroding your relationship.

Frustration manifests in a number of ways—answering questions in a curt manner, ignoring your partner, rolling your eyes, or saying “whatever.” Sometimes frustration shows itself in a slammed door or a sigh. However frustration shows up, it can indicate unhappiness and discontent. You might feel trapped, while your partner is in the dark regarding the source of the problem.

Experiencing occasional frustration is perfectly normal because you will not always agree and live in complete harmony. However, it is important to deal with frustration in appropriate ways to avoid bigger problems. Your frustration might be about something minor or it might relate to a more serious issue. Either way, frustration increases when there are misunderstandings and poor communication—so it is vital to face it head-on.

These suggestions can help you handle your frustration:

**Identify why you are frustrated.** Frustration refers to being upset or annoyed, especially because of an inability to change or achieve something. There are internal sources of frustration, such as when you are unable to get what you want. There are external sources—the conditions you encounter outside yourself—including people, places, and things that annoy you. It is possible that you are not actually frustrated with your partner, but instead you are taking out your frustration within your relationship. To reflect on why you are frustrated, you might ask yourself:

- Am I frustrated at a certain time or can I identify a pattern? (For example, are you more frustrated when you have to pay bills, knowing you have to move money around or you fall short?)
- Am I stressed and unable to talk to my partner about what is bothering me?
- Am I projecting frustration from external sources onto my partner? These situations might cause frustration:
  - Your health or physical/medical conditions
  - Your financial situation (including bankruptcy or wasteful spending)
  - Emotional difficulties or loss (bereavement or acute stress)

- Stagnation at work or job loss

Knowing when, why, and where you get frustrated is important to your ability to remove and/or cope with the sources of frustration in the healthiest manner.

**Communicate with your partner about what is frustrating you.** If you keep your feelings to yourself, your frustration will increase. Failure to clearly communicate when the frustration begins prevents your partner from understanding what is wrong or modifying the behavior that feeds your frustration. For example, if you are frustrated because your partner does not share in household tasks, explain why you are upset and schedule some time together to come up with a solution.

**Understand your partner's point of view.** Although your partner might be doing something that frustrates you, consider whether these actions are justified and logical—in which case, you can replace frustration with understanding and patience. Consider letting go of minor frustrations and making allowances for each other's differences.

**Look for the positive things and put your feelings into perspective.** Evaluate whether the issue is worth getting upset over, and replace your negative thoughts with positive ones. Look for what is "right" in your relationship and you might realize that your frustrations are minor.

**Compromise when something is really frustrating you.** Discuss these issues with your partner and come up with solutions to overcome the problems together. If you practice dealing with your frustrations through compromise, you will overcome problems more quickly and experience less frustration.

Everyone feels frustration sometimes, and you may feel that some of your frustration is caused by your partner. You might feel like confronting your partner, or even getting angry, but making another person feel bad will not reduce your frustration. You can work on expressing your feelings and communicating what you want without blaming your partner—taking responsibility for your own behavior.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

When my frustration level is high, I tend to: (*check all that apply*)

\_\_\_\_\_ Get very quiet

\_\_\_\_\_ Lose my temper

\_\_\_\_\_ Raise my voice

\_\_\_\_\_ Freeze

\_\_\_\_\_ Say things I don't mean

\_\_\_\_\_ Blame others

\_\_\_\_\_ Make empty threats

\_\_\_\_\_ Stop listening

\_\_\_\_\_ Start to cry

\_\_\_\_\_ Leave the room



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use alcohol or drugs                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Use guilt/shame      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid/withdraw                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Throw things         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use "you" statements                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Count to ten/breathe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Involve others (friends, other family members) | <input type="checkbox"/> Exaggerate           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lie  | <input type="checkbox"/> Become physical      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calm myself before reengaging                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____         |

This is how my partner responds to my frustration: (check all that apply)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shuts down                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Gets quiet             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gets angry                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Leaves the room        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Goes to the gym/exercises             | <input type="checkbox"/> Escalates              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gets physical                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Complies with me       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gets defensive                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Breaks things          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accuses me of things                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Makes empty promises   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stops listening                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Apologizes             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Uses sarcasm                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Fights back            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ignores me                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Threatens me or others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gets loud/yells                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Cries                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Says "whatever," or "I don't care."   | <input type="checkbox"/> Becomes disrespectful  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Says things they don't mean           | <input type="checkbox"/> Acts depressed         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agrees with me so I will stop talking | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____           |

Over the next week or two, keep track of what you do when you get frustrated and how your partner responds to your frustration.

Date	What happened?	How did I show my frustration?	How did my partner respond?

Review the chart and describe any patterns you notice; for example, "I tend to get frustrated in the morning when I feel pressure to get to work on time."

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Describe some healthier ways you can manage your frustration.

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Were you surprised by your partner's responses? Explain.

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What can you do as a couple to work together to manage frustration?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying Patterns of Emotionally-Charged Communication

## Objective

To change the cycle of negative conversation patterns by recognizing and understanding how they impact your relationship.

## You Should Know

All couples experience a range of emotions in their relationships. Some couples weather difficult moments and misunderstandings, bouncing back from conflict with ease. Other couples get caught up in their misunderstandings and experience a pattern or cycle of emotionally charged reactions that evolve into anger and conflict. If you and your partner experience this negative communication cycle, it affects how close, respected, and secure you feel with one another. When these unhealthy interactions become a regular pattern, and conversations follow a typical course, this cycle feeds on itself and erodes your relationship. Conversations repeatedly follow a familiar pattern—regardless of the topic.

Three patterns tend to occur in relationships:

**Protesting/withdrawing.** As couples work toward a resolution and attempt to problem-solve, escalation occurs. One or both partners might seem demanding, confrontational, and insistent as they attempt to reconnect. One partner might withdraw and try to minimize conflict by placating, defending, distancing, or emotionally shutting down.

**Being loud to be heard.** Couples communicate with anger, and their voices increase in volume as they demand, criticize, or complain. Escalation occurs quickly, and anger is readily expressed. The conversation deteriorates, and separation occurs in order to defuse the situation.

**Avoiding conflict at all costs.** The couple handles challenging situations with withdrawal and avoidance. Issues are rarely resolved and may simmer under the surface for months or years.

When you engage in negative and emotionally charged communication with your partner, your behaviors and reactions may feed into the creation of repetitive patterns that damage your relationship. By identifying these cycles, you can change those patterns and work together on a common goal: noticing the emotionally charged negative cycle as it is occurring in real time.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

What I do: \_\_\_\_\_

How I feel inside: \_\_\_\_\_

The more I \_\_\_\_\_, the more you \_\_\_\_\_.

When I don't feel connected with you, I react by \_\_\_\_\_, and then you \_\_\_\_\_.

Did you identify your communication pattern? Describe.

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What are the "typical" reactions you and your partner have to one another?

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How can you defuse tense moments in order to break the cycle?

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What tools can you use to interrupt emotionally charged communication patterns?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Changing Faulty Assumptions

## Objective

To recognize unrealistic assumptions and replace them with more realistic ideas.

## You Should Know

Each of us sometimes makes faulty assumptions in our romantic relationships. Our assumptions might originate from outside sources, like the media, our family, or our coworkers or friends. Or we might have unrealistic assumptions because we have not clearly communicated our thoughts and feelings to our partners. We assume what our partner is thinking or feeling. Faulty or unrealistic assumptions can harm our relationships by leaving people feeling undervalued and unheard.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Review the example below, and then identify unrealistic assumptions you have about your partner. Replace each with a realistic assumption.

Example:

Unrealistic assumption: *My partner should support all my ideas.*

Realistic assumption: *My partner can support me as a person, even if they disagree with some of my ideas.*

Unrealistic assumption:

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Realistic assumption:

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Unrealistic assumption:

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Realistic assumption:

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Unrealistic assumption:

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Realistic assumption:

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Unrealistic assumption:

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Realistic assumption:

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Did you find this exercise difficult or easy? Explain.

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Were you surprised by your partner's responses? Describe.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Increasing Your Self-Respect

## Objective

To improve your relationship by identifying ways to increase your self-respect.

## You Should Know

In order to have healthy relationships, you first need to respect yourself. This means that you value your own feelings and opinions. You ask for what you want, need, and deserve. You are honest with yourself and your partner, and you are comfortable being authentic. You treat yourself with respect and dignity. You make yourself heard and understood.

The acronym FAST is an easy way to remember the rules for respecting yourself:

**F:** Be fair in your interactions to get your needs met. Avoid taking advantage of your partner.

**A:** Apologize when necessary, but avoid apologizing for the way you feel. No need to say sorry when there is nothing to apologize for!

**S:** Stick to your values. Do not compromise your morals and values in order to be accepted by your partner, or to gain affection.

**T:** Be truthful. Avoid lying, acting helpless, or exaggerating.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Which of the following statements describes you? Check all that apply.

Other people often take me for granted.

I worry constantly that my partner doesn't care about me.

I feel threatened when my partner spends time with other people.

It is difficult for me to express myself.

I am afraid to make other people angry at me.

I rarely feel heard by people I care about.

I will do almost anything to avoid a confrontation.

It is very important for me to get approval from others.

\_\_\_ I sometimes act “fake” so other people will like me.

\_\_\_ People describe me as overly sensitive or dramatic, or as taking things out of context.

\_\_\_ When I am alone, I feel empty and worthless.

\_\_\_ I never think I am good enough.

\_\_\_ I would rather be in a bad relationship than be alone.

\_\_\_ I tend to push people away when they get too close.

\_\_\_ I am terrified of being hurt.

Review the statements you have checked off and write down your thoughts about the ones that concern you the most.

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Now role-play situations when you felt uncomfortable or disrespected, and then incorporate one or more of the FAST techniques. Use the following chart to track what happens.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>The technique I used</b>	<b>What I said or did</b>	<b>How my partner reacted</b>	<b>How it made me feel</b>

What was it like to role play situations when you felt disrespected? Describe your experience.

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Which of the FAST techniques was most difficult for you? Explain.

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What can you do the next time you are faced with a challenging situation? Which FAST technique(s) will you most likely use?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Exercising Your Rights to Your Needs and Feelings

## Objective

To exercise your rights to your needs and feelings, and identify others who will validate them.

## You Should Know

As human beings, we all need to communicate our feelings, desires, and opinions, and we all deserve to be heard, respected, and validated. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. You may have been told that your feelings are unimportant or undeserving of others' time or attention. You may avoid asking for help or expressing your emotions, so that you do not upset, disappoint, or challenge other people.

Put a check next to the statements that best describe you:

Others have told me that my feelings are weird, wrong, or bad.

When I have an emotional reaction, I have been told to "get over it" or "stop being so dramatic," or that I am overreacting.

I am afraid to ask for help from others because I am fearful that I will be judged.

I am afraid to ask for help from others because I am sure I will be rejected.

I annoy other people when I share my needs and feelings.

I am often ignored or disrespected when I express my needs and feelings.

I am constantly misunderstood.

I don't deserve to ask for, or receive, what I need.

I would rather not get my needs met than push back or assert myself, out of fear of being mistreated.

Add your own statements here:

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Regardless of the number of statements you checked off, one thing is true: your needs and feelings are worthy of acknowledgment and validation by others.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

First, recognize that you have a right to your own feelings, needs, and opinions, even if they differ from your partner's. Here are some statements that you can post on a mirror or carry with you as a reminder:

- I have a right to put myself first sometimes.
- I have a right to inconvenience or disappoint others sometimes.
- I have a right to need things from others.
- I have a right to express my emotions in ways that are not harmful to myself or others.
- I have a right to my beliefs and opinions.
- I have a right to experience things differently than others.
- I have a right to ask for help or support.
- I have a right to say no without being a selfish or bad person.
- I have a right to speak out against mistreatment from others.

Circle the statements you find most challenging to believe. Explain.

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Next, answer the following questions to identify people in your life who can help remind you of those rights—and can support you in receiving acknowledgment and validation.

Name one trustworthy, nonjudgmental person you can share your experiences and emotions with, and you can receive validation and support from: \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you select this person?

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How does this person make you feel about yourself?

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Name one trustworthy, nonjudgmental person who can help you practice asking for help, expressing yourself, or communicating your needs to others: \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you select this person?

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Name one trustworthy, nonjudgmental person who can help you practice disagreeing with others or saying no: \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you select this person?

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Where can you meet other trustworthy, supportive people (for example, work, religious institution, volunteer group)?

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Has this exercise changed how you regard your own feelings, needs, and opinions? Explain.

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Has this exercise improved your ability to express your feelings, needs, and opinions? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Handling a Bullying Partner

## Objective

To identify bullying behavior and take steps to change the situation.

## You Should Know

Bullying in relationships is much more common than most people realize. Though it is generally subtle, the effects can be far-reaching. Bullying wears down self-confidence and self-esteem. In a healthy relationship, partners are equals. But if one of the partners is a bully, there is an imbalance and the relationship might be at risk. Additionally, if you have children, bullying takes on greater consequences. Research shows that children who grow up in a home with a bullying parent are more likely to become bullies—or be bullied—themselves.

Some examples of bullying by a partner are:

- Knowing your weaknesses and using them against you.
- Being overly possessive, including making you feel guilty when you spend time with others.
- Blaming you for bad moods, saying you provoked or hurt or disappointed them.
- Playing the martyr, acting as though they are long-suffering and you are selfish or incompetent.
- Being unable to handle having authority questioned and having to be in control and beyond reproach.
- Lying to seem smarter or more accomplished.
- Always finding fault, pointing out your mistakes and never what you've done right.

If your partner engages in controlling, undermining, or intimidating behavior, there are steps you can take to protect yourself and repair your relationship.

- Keep a written record of the bullying behavior. Make sure each incident is detailed and dated.
- Show your partner the written record you have kept. This record will serve as proof for a partner who is in denial.
- Talk with your partner about the behavior. Explain why the behavior bothers you. Some bullies don't even realize their behavior is bullying until it is pointed out to them.
- Discuss with your partner the reasons why they feel the need to be in control at all times. Both of you may need to make some changes to rectify the situation.
- When bullying occurs, stand up for yourself. This does not mean starting an argument, but letting your partner know you will consider their input and make your own decisions.

Your efforts might not be enough. A professional can help your partner modify their negative behaviors and help you strengthen your relationship.

### **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Use the chart below to keep track of bullying behaviors.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Incident</b>	<b>Details</b>

**Important:** If the bullying is severe or involves physical violence, you must remove yourself from the situation immediately. Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline 24/7 at 1-800-799-7233.

When you shared the information with your partner, did it affect their behavior? How?

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If your partner did not change their behavior, what are your next steps?

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### Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Reducing Your Need to Control Your Relationship

## Objective

To reduce your need to control your relationship by addressing your underlying motivations and feelings.

## You Should Know

There are a number of reasons why you might need to control your relationship. You might need control in your relationship to manage your anxiety. Your need for control might stem from a lack of trust and an effort to make the relationship feel safer. You may feel insecure about yourself or your relationship due to past hurtful experiences. Or you may disagree with, or doubt, your partner's decisions and believe you know what is best for them.

However, efforts to have control within your relationship often backfire. They may be met with resistance by your partner. Your partner may walk on eggshells out of fear of what will happen if your expectations are not met. There is also a risk of pushing your partner away because your requests are unreasonable.

Here are some examples of how a need for control can show up in a relationship.

- Feeling jealous when your partner spends time with friends or engages in hobbies
- Thinking you know what is best for your partner, and insisting that your way is the right way
- Repeating your side of an argument to make sure your partner understands your point of view
- Worrying excessively about your partner when they are not with you
- Giving advice that is not asked for or wanted
- Micromanaging household chores and tasks so they are done according to your specifications

You may be able to work out a positive compromise to what you and your partner want; however; even if you don't, you can start a conversation about how best to meet each other's needs.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

In what ways are you controlling within your relationship? Try to be as honest as possible.

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Describe how your controlling behavior impacts your partner's behavior or attitude toward you.

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Describe how your actions, and your partner's response, have affected your relationship, including feelings of frustration, anger, resentment, or regret for either or both of you.

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Use the following chart to identify how you try to control your relationship.

<b>Controlling behavior</b>	<b>Emotions underlying this behavior</b>	<b>Consequences of this behavior</b>	<b>What I could say to my partner</b>	<b>How my partner reacted afterward</b>

Did this exercise help you identify the fears or emotions driving your need for control? Explain.

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Did you identify productive ways to address your fears and emotions? Explain.

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While you cannot control your partner, you can control your own reactions, behaviors, and choices. What are some positive changes you would like to make for yourself? For example, consider enjoyable activities you can participate in when your partner is out with friends.

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What are some other ways that you can address your fear, anxiety, or distrust that don't involve trying to control your partner?

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Did this exercise change the way you will react to your partner in the future? Describe.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Communicating for Effective Conflict Resolution

## Objective

To resolve conflicts more effectively through use of the Couples Dialogue strategy.

## You Should Know

Most couples experience differences and disagreements. Research indicates that the level of disagreement is not related to marital happiness as much as how conflict is handled. Often conflict is rooted in misunderstood, manipulated, or “avoided” communications. Happy couples don’t avoid disagreements; they resolve those disagreements in a respectful, clear, caring manner. Effective communication is essential to healthy relationships. Clear communication is a window into the world of your partner. Truly being heard strengthens relationships.

When disagreements turn into personal insults, name-calling, raised voices, or mocking tones, the discussion is no longer productive. Pause the conversation if the disagreement becomes personal.

There are three steps to the Couples Dialogue strategy for resolving conflict:

**Mirroring.** This refers to accurately reflecting back the content of a message (for example, paraphrasing what your partner just said to you). During conflict you might focus on getting your own point across rather than listening to your partner. Before responding to your partner, restate what they said to you—in your own words. Continue this until your partner agrees that you fully understand.

**Validation.** Let your partner know that the information received and mirrored makes sense. Make the effort to see the issue from your partner’s point of view and understand what is true for them. This does not mean you agree with them. Trust and closeness are enhanced when your partner feels validated, listened to, and understood; for example, “I can see that,” or “I understand why you might take it that way.”

**Empathy.** This is the process of reflecting your partner’s feelings and emotions at a deep level. You recognize, reach into, and (on some level) experience the emotions of your partner; for example, “I sense your frustration,” or “I understand how much you’re hurting right now.”

Empathy offers remarkable healing power. Remember to use “I” statements and take responsibility for your own emotions.

Being accurately heard and understood initiates healing in relationships. Partners no longer feel as if they must cut off parts of themselves in order to be loved and accepted. Defensiveness, aggression, and other unhealthy communication tactics are minimized. Good communication skills may not solve all of the problems within your relationship, but nothing can be successfully resolved without healthy communication.



## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Set a time and place for discussion.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Define the issue to be addressed. Be specific.

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List any past attempts to resolve the issue.

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Discuss potential solutions to this issue, without judging or criticizing your partner's suggestions. Acknowledge your partner's needs: what is the desired outcome?

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Discuss each solution. Be as objective as possible, while practicing **mirroring** and **validation**. Listen carefully and accurately paraphrase each message while clearly and honestly communicating with one another. Validate each other's experience of this process and **empathize** with your partner's feelings. As you share potential solutions, the level of intimacy and vulnerability may increase. Use all the information gathered in a loving and supportive manner (not as a weapon to hurt your partner). Agree on the solution and determine how each partner will work toward this solution. Again, be specific.

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If you and your partner do not agree, focus on a resolution instead. Is there a compromise that benefits both partners? Does this disagreement really matter to your relationship? Is it possible for each partner to simply let it go and move on?

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Know when to take a break. Have a plan in place so that you or your partner can call for a break if required. When you have both calmed down, return to your discussion. What can you say to indicate you need a break? How will you know when a line has been crossed, and what can you do to avoid escalation?

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After your discussion, write down your experiences, noting what each partner said or did to effectively resolve the issue. If either partner resorted to old patterns of communicating or dealing with conflict, write about that in detail so you can both refer to it at a later date.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Developing Assertive Communication Skills

## Objective

To express yourself clearly by communicating in an assertive manner.

## You Should Know

The content of your communication can be facts, ideas, concepts, opinions, attitudes, or emotions. How you communicate this content is influenced by your style. If you're primarily

- passive, you put others' needs, wants, and feelings before your own;
- aggressive, what you want, need, and feel comes first;
- passive-aggressive, you're indirectly hostile, using sarcasm and other similar behaviors;
- assertive, you express yourself honestly, openly, and directly.

Learning how to communicate assertively is important because it supports successful relationships, helping you clearly express your ideas and feelings, as well as understand your partner's emotions and thoughts.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

What is your primary communication style? \_\_\_\_\_

If your communication style is more passive or aggressive (or a combination of both), what are some ways you can begin to communicate more assertively?

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If your communication style requires some work, that's okay. Practice using assertive communication skills to consistently communicate in a more effective manner. Over the next week, keep track of how you're communicating with your partner.

Week of: _____	Is this typically true for me?	Did I consistently practice within the past week?
I'm respectful of myself and other people.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I fully recognize my own needs and wants.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I use clear "I" statements.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I allow myself to make mistakes.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I change my mind (when appropriate).	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I request time to "think about it."	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy my successes without putting myself down.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I clearly ask for what I want/need.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I know that I'm not responsible for others' behaviors or choices.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I actively listen and thoughtfully respond.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I strive to be in integrity with myself/others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I can easily and confidently say no.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I take a problem-solving approach to conflict, rather than becoming angry or reactive.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
My communication is honest and direct.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

Think of a situation this week where you communicated assertively with your partner. What happened? How did you feel after this experience? Did you experience any physical reactions?

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In general, how did your partner respond when you communicated in an assertive manner?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Using “I” Statements

## Objective

To effectively express your wants, needs, and feelings by using “I” statements.

## You Should Know

You might have trouble communicating what you want and need to your partner. If you are not communicating clearly, you may blame your partner for the problem, saying things like “You never pay attention to me when I talk,” or “You just don’t understand me.”

By blaming the communication problem on your partner, “you” statements are likely to make the listener feel defensive—and your communication breaks down further. It is possible to express yourself, resolve conflicts, and get what you want in your relationships by using “I” statements that accurately describe what you want and how your partner’s behavior affects you. When you use “I” statements, you are speaking assertively from your own experience and taking responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings.

For example:

Instead of: “You’re always yelling at me!”

You could say: “I feel upset when you yell at me. Can we talk calmly, please?”

Instead of: “You’re always spending time with your friends. Don’t you care about me?”

You could say: “I’m concerned that we don’t spend any time together anymore. I miss you.”

Instead of: “You make me so mad!”

You could say: “I’m frustrated that you won’t take the doctor’s advice. I want you to be healthy.”

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down some “you” statements that you frequently make when talking to your partner.

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Change these into "I" statements.

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Next, keep track of situations or conflicts where you normally use a "you" statement to express yourself or ask for what you need. Instead, use an "I" statement, and then record the outcomes. Pay particular attention to how your partner responded.

Situation	What were my thoughts and feelings?	What "I" statement did I use?	What was the outcome?



Did you find that your communication improved when you shifted from “you” statements to “I” statements? Give an example.

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Did your partner notice you were communicating in a different way? What did they say or do?

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What can you do to remind yourself to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Communicating Your Wants and Needs

## Objective

To become more effective in communicating your wants and needs to your partner.

## You Should Know

When your emotions are overwhelming, it can be challenging to express yourself calmly and clearly, or to convey your needs to your partner. There are tools you can use to resolve conflicts and make requests to others in a respectful and effective way.

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) uses the acronym DEAR MAN to explain the steps for improving communication and expressing what you want. This tool can be used to make nearly any difficult conversation a little easier. You will find that this tool can help improve communication in your relationships, including reducing conflict and increasing your understanding of your partner.

DEAR MAN stands for:

**D**escribe the situation.

**E**xpress your feelings.

**A**ssert yourself by asking.

**R**einforce through reward.

**(S**tay) **m**indful.

**A**ppear confident.

**N**egotiate.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Think of a recent situation where you had difficulty communicating your thoughts and needs to your partner. After each brief description, write down your ideas about how you could have used the tool.

**DESCRIBE** refers to stating the facts (not the feelings) in a situation. (*"I'm working late tonight and I won't be home for dinner."*)

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**EXPRESS** refers to talking about your feelings and opinions directly and openly. (*"I'm under a lot of pressure at work. I'm stressed that I need to work late again to meet my deadlines."*)

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**ASSERT** means to say precisely what you want, rather than hinting around or hoping your partner will figure it out. Asserting might involve saying no. (*"Could you please leave work a little earlier so you can make dinner or grab some takeout on the way home?"*)

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**REINFORCE** means telling your partner how they will benefit when you get what you want. (*"It would really help me out so I can get this project done. I might even be able to leave the office early on Friday if I'm productive enough."*)

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**MINDFUL** refers to being present and focused in the moment. Try to avoid getting distracted with old arguments or personal attacks. Being clear and calm will enable you to be heard better and accepted more openly. (*"I know I've been working late a lot this week, but it can't be helped."*)

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**APPEAR CONFIDENT** even when you may not feel sure of yourself. Be aware of your tone of voice—is it calm or agitated? Make eye contact. Hold your body erect and be aware of your breath. Repeat your request, if necessary.

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**NEGOTIATE** refers to being flexible and open-minded. Talk about what options are possible. Listen without judging or interrupting. Think of mutually beneficial ways to compromise if necessary. You have to give to get. (*"I'll make your favorite dinner and dessert next week as a thank-you."*)

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In the next week or so, keep track of situations where you used DEAR MAN with your partner to help improve your communication skills and get your wants and needs met.

Situation	What I wanted/needed	The DEAR MAN skills I used

Which DEAR MAN skills did you find the most effective? Explain.

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Which DEAR MAN skills did you find challenging? Explain.

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Did anything surprise you about how your partner responded to your requests using DEAR MAN? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Sticking Up for Yourself

## Objective

To be more assertive in communicating with your partner in an effective but respectful manner.

## You Should Know

Many people find it hard to be assertive in their intimate relationship. They may be naturally timid and shy, or their partner may be intimidating and even use “power” techniques to gain the upper hand in the relationship. If you are someone who tends to defer to others, this can affect your self-image and keep you from getting your needs met.

Perhaps it is hard for you to say no or to ask for what you want. Perhaps you have learned that it is “selfish” to even *have* needs of your own, much less express them. Or maybe you tend to be a “people pleaser” and avoid stating your opinions and thoughts.

Learning to stick up for yourself can be uncomfortable or even scary at first because it is so unfamiliar. Your partner might react with surprise or shock, or push back. That’s okay. In order to honor your own value and worth, keep at it! You might be the one who is pleasantly surprised by your partner’s ability to see you more clearly so that your relationship can flourish.

These tips can help you become more assertive:

- Check your posture. If you are slumping, straighten your body and hold your head high.
- Make eye contact, even if it is hard.
- Control your breathing as best you can. Take deep diaphragmatic breaths to stay cool.
- Speak with a calm, confident voice.
- Use assertive language, especially “I” statements: “I feel angry when you turn your back to me when I’m trying to talk with you,” rather than “Why do you always ignore me?”
- Identify what you want and ask for it without making your partner guess or read your mind.
- Don’t apologize for stating your feelings.
- Be aware of when you feel defensive about something.
- Don’t take responsibility for your partner’s behavior.
- Practice finding areas where you and your partner can compromise. Be open to listening.
- Let your partner know assertively but not aggressively if they interrupt you: “Excuse me, I’m not finished speaking,” rather than “Hey! I was talking!”
- Use the “broken record” technique when you feel you aren’t being heard: “Yes, I hear what you’re saying, but I would like to spend more time with just us, without you checking your phone so frequently.” Repeat as needed.

- If you feel yourself shutting down or wanting to escape, take a moment to collect yourself, perhaps grounding yourself through your feet or taking a few breaths.

As you practice these tips, be sure to check in with yourself about your comfort level. Be patient and kind with yourself throughout this process, but try pushing yourself a bit beyond your comfort zone, without becoming upset, accusatory, or, by contrast, passive or withdrawn.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate yourself in terms of your communication with your partner on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = not at all and 10 = always.

\_\_\_ I stand up for my own needs.

\_\_\_ I believe I deserve to be heard.

\_\_\_ I have a right to my own feelings and opinions.

\_\_\_ I share my feelings and opinions with my partner.

\_\_\_ I am able to ask for what I want and need.

\_\_\_ I say no when I don't want to do something.

\_\_\_ I tend to avoid conflict and fear rejection.

\_\_\_ I am more comfortable being submissive.

\_\_\_ I am usually the one to compromise.

\_\_\_ My past attempts at being assertive have failed.

\_\_\_ I feel frustrated and unheard in my relationship.

\_\_\_ Sometimes I can't tell what I feel or need.

Note those items that you ranked 4 or below. Are these areas that you can work on by yourself? Or do you have a friend, a counselor or therapist, or a loving relative, who can help you practice how to stick up for yourself better? Note here several people in your life who might help you become more assertive.

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Write down some thoughts about how your life might be more satisfying if you were able to stick up for yourself in your relationship. Review these if you become discouraged.

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Who are your role models for good communication in relationships (someone you know or public figures)? What about them would you like to emulate?

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Name two or three times in your life when you effectively stuck up for yourself. If you have trouble thinking of an example, think of a time when you said no to something you did not want to do.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Decreasing Criticism and Judgment of Your Partner

## Objective

To increase your supportive behavior by identifying the judgments and criticisms you make about your partner.

## You Should Know

It is only natural to occasionally judge or even criticize your partner. However, if you find that you are constantly judging your partner's behavior and making critical comments, then you are devaluing your partner and eroding your relationship.

Criticisms like these are particularly destructive in a relationship:

- Criticism that is directed at your partner's personality or character, rather than their behavior.
- Criticism that is intended to blame or shame your partner.
- Criticism that suggests there is no room for improvement.
- Criticism that assumes there is only one right way to do things.
- Criticism that is belittling or unkind.

If there are things you want your partner to change, they are much more likely to do this when you act in ways that are supportive and respectful. A partner who feels valued and respected will be much more interested in trying to please you.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Over the next few weeks, write down each time you find yourself criticizing your partner and note how they react. Also, write down the supportive things you say or do and how your partner reacts. See if you can decrease your critical comments and increase your supportive statements.

<b>Date</b>	<b>What I said to criticize my partner</b>	<b>How my partner reacted</b>	<b>What I did or said to be supportive</b>	<b>How my partner reacted</b>

How does your partner typically react when you are critical?

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How does your partner typically react when you are more supportive?

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Did you see any patterns about the way you and your partner relate to each other?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Responding to Relationship Abuse

## Objective

To protect yourself by learning the steps to take if you feel you are in danger from your partner.

## You Should Know

Abusive relationships can take many forms. The most common forms of abuse are:

**Physical**—any form of physical aggression, including hitting, slapping, kicking, shoving, pushing, choking, hurting someone with an object or weapon, or purposely breaking things that belong to them.

**Sexual**—pressuring or blackmailing someone into a sex act of any kind when they don't want it.

**Emotional**—name-calling, yelling, criticizing, belittling, humiliating, or lying about you. This can also include attempts to control your whereabouts or keep you from spending time with friends or family.

**Cyber**—abusive texts and phone calls, unwanted sexting, manipulating social media, stealing passwords, and pressure to post or send sexual photos or videos.

Safety is the most important thing to think about in leaving an abusive relationship. If you're in an abusive relationship, you need to end it as soon as possible. But how do you do this? The first step is to **tell someone**. You probably have already thought of this, but maybe you are afraid to tell someone, or you are embarrassed about things you have done. It's understandable that you feel this way, but you'll feel safer when you talk to someone about what's going on and what you want.

**Important:** *If you feel there is an immediate danger, call 911. If you feel that there is the potential of danger, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline 24/7 at 1-800-799-7233.*

## What to Do

Here are some common warning signs that indicate you are likely in an abusive relationship. Put a check next to the ones that apply to you.

Does your partner:

\_\_\_\_\_ Check your phone, email, or social media accounts without permission?

\_\_\_\_\_ Express extreme jealousy or insecurity?

\_\_\_\_\_ Constantly belittle you or put you down?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have an explosive temper?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Try to isolate you from family and friends or tell you who to spend time with?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Continually accuse you of things that are not true?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Exhibit constant mood swings?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Physically hurt you (slapping, pushing, grabbing, shaking, smacking, kicking, punching)?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Act possessive or controlling?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tell you what you can and cannot do?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Demand to know where you are at all times and with whom?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Threaten to injure you or themselves if you leave the relationship?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Blame you for everything that goes wrong?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Demand you spend time with them exclusively?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Constantly criticize your appearance or dress?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tell you to quit an activity or something you love to do?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Raise a hand or fist as if they are going to hit you?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Force you to go further than you want to sexually?

Of the four types of abusive behaviors listed in the section above (physical, sexual, emotional, cyber), which ones are you experiencing in your current relationship? Describe each in as much detail as you can.

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Describe any other types of abuse that may be affecting you, such as spiritual or work-related.

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How are abusive experiences affecting you?

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Write down the names of people you can talk to about your relationship.

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If you've reached out for help, what happened?

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Are there still obstacles or challenges to ending the abusive relationship? Who can help you?

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What steps can you take to leave this relationship?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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## **Section Three: Deepen Emotional Intimacy**

# Improving Your Connection

## Objective

To build a deep and lasting connection by fully engaging with your partner.

## You Should Know

There might be times during your relationship when you feel disconnected from your partner. Sometimes the harder you try to connect, the worse things seem to get. If you are openly sharing your thoughts and feelings, but your partner seems to be distant, you might consider developing your connection-building skills.

Connecting isn't just about sharing what you feel and think; instead, it involves full engagement of both people. Unresolved conflict can lead to distancing, and initiating connection through your tone, style, and approachable attitude can lead to swifter resolution. Openness and transparency deepen connection in relationships—even if you have had a strained connection, total disconnection, or difficulties resolving conflicts in the past.

Connectivity can be achieved by following a few simple steps:

- Recognize the importance of everyday interactions. Positive, affectionate, and consistent interaction builds trust and intimacy.
- Ask questions, note your partner's answers, and continue asking for clarity. Understanding your partner stems from their feeling comfortable enough to share openly and honestly, and sustaining your connection through understanding is a lifelong process.
- Create an environment of respect and appreciation while expressing what you love about your partner. Each time you show appreciation for your partner, you deepen your emotional connection.

Couples might believe that connection comes easily, and if there are problems connecting there is something wrong with the relationship. Actually, for most couples, deep and sustained connection requires a conscious decision to make the relationship a priority and a willingness to discover ways to connect each day.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Describe a way you can connect with your partner at the beginning of each day.

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Describe an evening ritual that you and your partner can engage in together.

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Schedule a weekly time you can devote to each other: \_\_\_\_\_

List at least three positive affirmations you can say to your partner each day.

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What interests do you share with your partner?

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What can you do to increase physical affection?

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Looking back at what you have written, did you discover new ways to connect with your partner?

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Were you surprised by any of the answers?

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How did you feel during and after connecting with your partner?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Increasing Intimacy Through Verbal Communication

## Objective

To increase intimacy by developing and prioritizing effective verbal communication.

## You Should Know

One way that couples connect is through verbal communication. The way you communicate affects how your partner interprets what you are saying. Your body language, inflection, tone, volume, and the actual words you speak impact your relationship—either positively or negatively. For your relationship to thrive, a consistent flow of information, encouragement, and discussion is important. Spending time each day to discuss your thoughts, feelings, emotions, and desires strengthens your relationship and increases intimacy between you and your partner. Intentional daily communication can accomplish several things:

- Establishing a safe space to voice concerns or problems before they become significant issues
- Giving each partner the opportunity to express their wants or needs to one another
- Making a habit of providing encouragement and support, as well as celebrating the good
- Discussing plans and goals so that you share in decision-making
- Openly expressing your emotions to each other in a healthy way
- Making it easier to detect subtle relationship changes that occur over time

Prioritizing effective verbal communication makes it less likely that you and your partner will experience disconnection and deterioration of your relationship.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

<b>When we communicate:</b>	<b>Is this typical for me?</b>	<b>Is this typical for my partner?</b>
I offer full attention when I talk to my partner.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I focus on my partner's good qualities and frequently compliment them.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I often use praise and encouragement.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I easily and openly verbalize my thoughts, feelings, and needs.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I listen to understand rather than judge.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I tend to understand my partner, even during disagreements.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I respectfully validate my partner's thoughts and feelings when we disagree.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I avoid blaming and actively work toward solutions.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I am aware of my tone of voice when speaking to my partner.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I follow up with a positive comment if I've offered a criticism.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I replace nagging or criticism with appreciation and gratitude.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I celebrate and focus on the good things in our relationship.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I share my plans and include my partner in decision-making.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I am comfortable approaching my partner any time we need or want to talk.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I approach our conversations with a sense of curiosity and frequently ask questions for clarity.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

Did you discover areas where you can improve your verbal communication with your partner?

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Were you surprised by any of your partner's answers?

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What feelings or emotions came up while sharing your answers with your partner?

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How can you improve your verbal communication skills with your partner?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Building Trust

## Objective

To maintain a healthy relationship by establishing or rebuilding trust.

## You Should Know

Trust is a necessary element in close, healthy, intimate relationships, yet you can probably bring to mind situations when your trust was broken, or when you were betrayed or hurt. It is much easier to lose trust than it is to build it, and it can take a long time to rebuild trust. You might believe your relationship is over if your trust has been betrayed, or you might wish to maintain your relationship and rebuild trust. Either way, it is critical to rebuild trust after difficult situations.

If you hope to rebuild trust, you will need to release or suspend some of your doubts. While you have the right to feel hurt, angry, or sad, if you cannot move on from those feelings, the relationship might not continue.

In any relationship, healthy communication plays an important role in establishing or rebuilding trust. Talk honestly and openly, and if conflict arises, “fight fair” without name-calling or resurrecting the past. Your relationship might look very different after a major breach or infidelity, but it is possible to build something new together.

These suggestions can help you establish or rebuild trust:

**Trust yourself.** Learning to trust yourself and your own feelings is important to any healthy relationship.

**Say what you mean and mean what you say.** Avoid making promises you will not follow through with, or saying things that do not accurately reflect how you feel. Lying, even if it feels small or insignificant, will likely result in your partner no longer trusting what you say.

**Be emotionally vulnerable.** Building trust requires you to open yourself up to the potential of being hurt. You begin to trust when you can rely on your partner, share your deepest fears, and feel assured that your partner will be there for you.

**Show respect.** Unfortunately, you might occasionally show your partner your worst qualities, losing sight of the fact that respect is even more significant to people you love due to the harm that lack of respect causes. Each time you treat your partner in a way that is disrespectful—for example, by belittling them or looking at them with condescension or contempt—you damage the connection, making it more difficult for your partner to trust you over time.

**Give your partner the benefit of the doubt.** If you trust your partner, it is easier to default to the belief their intentions are honest when there is uncertainty or doubt surrounding the circumstances. Assume your partner has good intentions. If they disappoint you in some way, it may be a misunderstanding or a simple mistake. Get clarity before pointing fingers.

**Express your feelings.** An important element of emotional intimacy is expressing your feelings without shouting, verbally attacking, or shutting down the conversation. In order to build trust, develop ways of discussing your feelings that are collaborative and respectful.

**Consider reciprocity.** Be willing to give as well as receive.

**Communicate openly.** Openly talk and truly listen to each other, considering each other's needs. If either partner feels unwilling or unable to meet those needs, the couple may need to review their options.

**Take responsibility for your actions.** Admit to your behavior, reflect on your actions, and assume responsibility. Also, understand how your behavior affected your partner.

## **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Answer these questions.

Do I trust myself? If not, what can I do to learn to trust myself?

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What are some ways I can say what I mean, and mean what I say?

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What are some ways I can be emotionally vulnerable with my partner?

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Do I distrust my partner because of a recent situation or betrayal? Describe.

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Do I feel comfortable asking my partner for what I need and want in the relationship? Explain.

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Am I vulnerable with my partner, including relying on them for help and support? Explain.

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Do I treat my partner with respect? What are some ways I can be more respectful?

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Next, choose at least one of the following actions to try over the next week:

- **Schedule time to practice communicating honestly about key issues in your relationship.** Discuss important topics that impact your life together, such as your finances, or concerns about a child or family member. Listen to your partner’s side of the story, and unless your partner gives you a good reason to distrust them, believe you are hearing the truth. However, trust your intuition—if there are red flags, ask for clarification.
- **Follow through on a promise.**
- **Apologize.** If you catch yourself being unkind or disrespectful, immediately take responsibility for your behavior and apologize.
- **Spend thirty seconds gazing into each other’s eyes.** Share a fear or secret with your partner.
- **Avoid looking at your partner’s phone, reading email, and so forth.** Though it might be difficult, in order to reestablish trust, it is important to give your partner the benefit of the doubt.

Other ideas:

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Use this chart to track your trust-building activities.

Date	Trust-building activity	How did my partner respond?	Outcome

Which of these actions did you try? What was most effective? Explain.

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How did this exercise help establish or rebuild trust in your relationship? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Using Open Body Language

## Objective

To improve your communication by increasing your awareness of open body language.

## You Should Know

Body language is an important part of the way people communicate. Your body language can express your openness to your partner. On the other hand, when you are having a problem communicating with your partner, it might be because your body language does not match your words. When that happens, your efforts may be having the opposite effect.

Body language has many different aspects. These descriptions can help you become conscious of what open body language looks and feels like:

**Facial expression.** Generally, people are not very aware of their facial expressions. When you are feeling compassionate and open to your partner, it will be easy to see that in your facial expression, just as it will be apparent on your face if you are angry or upset. Needless to say, it is always best to be honest about your feelings.

**Eye contact.** Normally when people are engaged in a conversation, they make eye contact about 60 percent of the time. Less eye contact gives the impression that you are not interested in what your partner is saying. Too much eye contact can seem like you are staring and can feel weird to your partner.

**Posture.** Sit comfortably when engaged in a conversation, but also lean forward to show your interest in what your partner is saying.

**Gestures.** Some people use gestures more than others, and different cultures have different meanings for different gestures. Gestures are used to emphasize a point. Positive gestures include short-clap, thumbs up, and the “okay” sign.

**Voice volume and tone.** Your voice is also an important part of how you express your attitude and feelings. The same words can have completely different meanings depending on the way you say them.

**Physical contact.** No aspect of body language speaks louder than a touch. It can be as simple as a pat on the back or placing your hand on top of your partner’s hand.

**Proximity.** The distance between two people says a lot about how they are feeling toward each other. Usually, when you are having a meaningful conversation with a partner, you will want to be within an arm’s length.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Pick a time that is good for both of you to have an open conversation. When you are done, rate each other on the following statements, using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = don't agree at all and 10 = strongly agree. Then answer the questions that follow.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner's facial expression told me they were listening.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner made good eye contact with me throughout our conversation.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner sat in a way that showed they cared about what I was saying.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner's voice showed that they were concerned and caring.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner made physical contact in a way that made me feel good about our conversation.

What are some ways your partner expressed themselves nonverbally that made you feel connected?

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Were there some nonverbal things your partner did that put you off? Explain.

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What can you do to improve your body language? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Thinking Flexibly

## Objective

To become more open-minded and compassionate by learning to think flexibly.

## You Should Know

Do you have rigid and set ideas about your partner? Do you tend to categorize people as “good” or “bad?” Do you have an unchanging negative view of life or situations? Inflexible views typically lead to unhappiness, social isolation, and unneeded suffering in your life.

On the other hand, flexible thinking can make you more open-minded and compassionate toward your partner as well as toward yourself. When you develop the habit of flexible thinking, you will likely find yourself feeling more in control of your emotions. You will feel calmer and happier with a greater sense of satisfaction about your life. A flexible and compassionate attitude can greatly improve your relationship with your partner.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree. There are 100 possible points. If you score under 75, consider finding ways to think and act with more flexibility and compassion.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to see different sides of an argument.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consider how my behaviors affect my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consider the consequences of my actions on my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ When making a choice, I think about how it will affect my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consider my partner’s feelings when I’m talking.

\_\_\_\_\_ When making choices, I look ahead to what might happen.

\_\_\_\_\_ I learn from my mistakes.

\_\_\_\_\_ I try to be nonjudgmental, even when I disagree with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ When we’re in a social situation, I take my partner’s needs into account.

\_\_\_\_\_ Even when I am upset with my partner, I try to see their point of view

\_\_\_\_\_ I am open to having several ideas at once and comparing them, even when they seem contradictory.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to change my mind when evidence supports another point of view.

\_\_\_\_\_ If I do something that upsets my partner, I try to understand what happened.

\_\_\_\_\_ I apologize if I have hurt my partner's feelings.

\_\_\_\_\_ If my partner is upset, I ask questions to understand how they feel.

\_\_\_\_\_ I try to make my partner feel better about themselves if I can.

\_\_\_\_\_ I look for good things about my partner, even when I don't like what they say or do.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to compromise when I disagree with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I don't feel like I always have to win an argument.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to keep my thoughts to myself when I feel they may hurt my partner.

Total points: \_\_\_\_\_

Did your score surprise you? Explain.

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Describe some ways you can be more flexible and compassionate.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Expressing Yourself to Increase Intimacy

## Objective

To increase intimacy through sharing and expressing yourself with your partner.

## You Should Know

Intimacy involves sharing and expressing yourself in a vulnerable way. You might not be accustomed to discussing personal or private details about yourself, particularly if you were raised in a family where self-expression was lacking or even discouraged. You may feel awkward or nervous when it comes to opening up about yourself or expressing your innermost feelings to your partner.

It can be frustrating if you feel there is a lack of intimacy, especially if you perceive it to be missing in your relationship. If you fear intimacy, you might have difficulty expressing your emotions, sharing your thoughts and feelings, and tuning in to how you feel. This lack of self-expression can push your partner away. Letting your partner in can feel scary, and it is sometimes easier to resort to behavior that will maintain the familiar pattern of rejection and isolation. One of your greatest fears might be that you will be abandoned or rejected.

Creating a thriving, healthy, intimate relationship takes time and effort. Sharing and expressing yourself may take practice, but discovering ways you can increase your self-expression within your relationship is the first step toward increased intimacy.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = don't agree at all, and 10 = strongly agree. Then answer the following questions:

- \_\_\_\_\_ I sometimes worry that my partner will discover things about me that are undesirable, shameful, or embarrassing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I fear that my partner will abandon me if they know my deepest thoughts or secrets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I worry that my partner will leave me, betray me, or withdraw their affection.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I fear that my partner will use personal information they know about me against me to hurt me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I worry that my partner will share my secrets with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I become more emotional with my partner than I do with other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have a difficult time remaining calm and rational when talking with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm sometimes afraid of what I might say or do if I reveal my feelings with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes I'm fearful that I will feel guilt or shame if I share my desires and feelings with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm afraid my partner will get angry if I share my desires and feelings.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes I don't want to hear what my partner has to say, nor do I want to share what comes up for me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do everything I can to hide my "flaws" from my partner.

Refer to the above list and write down three areas you would like to work on:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

How can you increase your comfort with intimate self-expression?

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Can you identify any patterns to situations where you tend to avoid self-expression? Explain.

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What do you think would happen if you shared your fears of self-expression and intimacy with your partner?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Strengthening Your Romantic Attachment to Your Partner

## Objective

To increase romantic attachment through emotional presence.

## You Should Know

In romantic relationships, people typically desire closeness, understanding, and acceptance, and want to feel appreciated, loved, and needed. These basic desires are healthy, and when partners' needs are met in a mutually satisfying way, romantic attachment is strengthened. Romantic love is considered an attachment bond when partners offer each other a safe haven during times of need. This bond offers a secure base for each partner. Romantic attachment is an important part of emotional closeness with your partner.

Attachment is basically about safety and survival. If your attachment needs are not met in your romantic relationship, it is normal to feel insecure, uncertain, or anxious. When you share these feelings with your partner, and your partner offers compassion, understanding, and reassurance, you will feel comforted and secure because your partner is demonstrating emotional presence. Consistent emotional presence strengthens your romantic attachment to one another.

Partners offer each other support, comfort, and emotional presence in a number of ways:

- Remaining patiently engaged when your partner feels confused, insecure, or anxious.
- Listening when your partner expresses worries or doubts.
- Inquiring about your partner's feelings.
- Expressing concern and providing physical comfort when your partner is upset.
- Offering encouragement, support, and attention.
- Asking questions that reflect curiosity.
- Discussing and debriefing events of the day together.



## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = don't agree at all, and 10 = strongly agree. Then answer the questions that follow.

\_\_\_\_\_ I reach out to my partner physically and emotionally when they are upset.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my partner attention when they feel uncertain or expresses doubts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I easily tune in to my partner's feelings.

\_\_\_\_\_ I comfort my partner and listen as they share their feelings.

\_\_\_\_\_ I confide in my partner if I feel insecure or anxious about our relationship.

\_\_\_\_\_ I share my doubts, worries, and vulnerabilities with my partner.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested and curious about my partner's feelings.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am aware of the changing needs within our relationship.

What is a recent example of emotional presence with your partner when they shared their doubts or insecurities?

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How did you respond to your partner?

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What was your level of engagement?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Expressing Your Feelings Through Physical Displays of Affection

## Objective

To use physical displays of affection that most effectively express your feelings to your partner.

## You Should Know

Studies have shown that nonsexual physical affection is strongly related to how satisfied participants felt with their relationship and their partner. Physical affection can be an effective way to improve emotional connection and also plays a role in how easily couples resolve conflicts. Sometimes, however, couples incorrectly assume which displays of expression their partner needs most.

For purposes of this worksheet, physical affection refers to these actions that promote feelings of love in the giver or receiver:

- Backrubs/massages
- Caressing/stroking
- Cuddling/holding
- Hugging
- Holding hands
- Kissing on the lips
- Kissing on the face

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Which types of physical affection do you receive most often from your partner? How do those actions make you feel about yourself and about your relationship?

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Which type(s) of physical affection do you give to your partner most often? What feelings are you trying to express to your partner, and about your relationship, using these actions?

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Set aside some time to talk to your partner about your preferences for physical affection. During this talk, take turns describing

- the types of physical affection you most enjoy receiving and giving, and why;
- how frequently and in which situations which you most desire affection (for example, in public, during stressful times);
- how you feel about yourself and your partner when you get the affection you want.

Summarize your responses here:

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Summarize your partner's responses here:

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Do your preferred methods of *receiving* affection correspond with what you receive from your partner? Explain.

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Do your preferred methods of *giving* affection to your partner correspond with what your partner most enjoys receiving? Explain.

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In what ways are your preferred types of affection similar to, and different from, your partner's?

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What surprised each of you most about the other's answers?

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Did this exercise change how you view physical affection in your relationship? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Talking About Your Sexual Needs with Your Partner

## Objective

To improve your sexual relationship by learning to talk openly about your needs and desires.

## You Should Know

Although sex and sexuality are all around us in our culture, many people still have a difficult time talking about their own sexual needs and desires. Some people still consider it taboo to be open and honest about what they like, what they don't like, what turns them on, what turns them off. Many couples struggle to discuss sex openly, perhaps out of some fantasy that their partner should be able to read their mind and know what they like. Many people worry that if they raise the issue of wanting more sex their partner will think they're "too sexual" or aggressive. Others are concerned that if they share that they would like less sex their partner will feel unloved or unattractive.

Putting into words one's sexual needs, desires, fears, worries, and hopes can be a challenge. But learning to communicate authentically with your partner can greatly improve your sex life together, whether you've been a couple for a long time or not. This doesn't mean sitting down and doing it all at once—it's a dialogue that evolves and grows over time, with the goal of deepening your level of intimacy and mutual pleasure.

These tips and strategies can help you have a new, healthy conversation about sex:

- Schedule a time to talk about sex with your partner in a "safe" location, with no kids around.
- Do not talk about sex when you are tired, hungry, angry, or distracted.
- Do not talk about sex when you are in bed or right before bedtime; or just before, during, or just after sex.
- If you are initiating the conversation, start slowly by saying you'd like to talk about your desire to be closer and to have a more satisfying intimate life.
- Use "I" statements in your communications and avoid blame. That is, instead of saying, "You're always in a hurry when we make love," try "I would love to slow down our lovemaking so I can feel closer to you," or "I get really turned on by foreplay—can we talk about how to do that more?"
- Ask your partner what they like, what satisfies them, what turns them on. Listen with an open mind and don't respond defensively.
- Don't try to cover everything in one conversation. Just broaching the topic can be challenging for many couples, so take it slow and be compassionate with yourself and your partner if this is a thorny or unfamiliar area of communication.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

What is the current frequency of sexual activity in your relationship, including everything from affectionate hugging to making love? (*For example, daily kissing, weekly intercourse, and so on.*)

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When you engage in sexual activity with your partner, who usually initiates? How do you feel about that? Are you happy with that pattern? If not, how do you wish it were different?

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What do you enjoy about your current sexual relationship with your partner?

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What are your top three concerns about your current sexual relationship with your partner?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What was your sexual relationship like in the past (if you have been together for a while)? What has changed, if anything? Why?

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Have you ever talked about your sexual needs with your partner before? What is your current communication like with your partner in general? That is, do you communicate openly and honestly about all aspects of your relationship or just some?

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What other types of sexual activity would you like to engage with your partner? (*For example, you would like to give and get oral sex, but your partner doesn't want to; you would like to try "kinky" sex, but your partner doesn't want to.*) Be specific.

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What types of sexual activity are off-limits for you, even if your partner desires them?

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What other aspects of your communication with your partner about sex and sexuality, needs, and desires, are important to you that have not otherwise been addressed? Be specific.

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What are your fears and worries about starting a conversation about sex with your partner?

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What would help you overcome those concerns? Is there someone you can talk to first—a friend, spiritual advisor, therapist?

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What is your vision for what your communication about sex would look like in the future? What one step are you willing to take today toward achieving that vision?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Addressing the Lack of Sexual Intimacy

## Objective

To rekindle sexual intimacy through exploration of needs and desires.

## You Should Know

A couple's sex life is often a good measure of the overall health of their relationship. Once a couple stops having sex, or no longer values sex as an important part of their relationship, it is an indicator that the relationship might be in trouble. Discussing this issue with your partner can be intimidating—particularly if you feel disconnected, sexually or otherwise.

When a relationship lacks sexual intimacy, there is often underlying unhappiness or discord (*if the couple has not agreed to the situation*). The health of your relationship depends on mutual sexual attraction and satisfaction. Candidly discussing your sexual feelings and preferences with your partner is important, but this might be difficult, awkward, or uncomfortable. However, there is nothing shameful at all about sexuality—a robust sex life supports physical and mental health and contributes to a strong and long-lasting relationship.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

When sex is a positive experience for you, approximately how frequently would you like to have sexual intercourse or activity? If it varies, what does it depend on?

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How often do you have feelings of sexual desire? \_\_\_\_\_

How satisfied are you with your current sexual experiences with your partner?

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Describe what you believe are your partner's current sexual experiences:

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What techniques might enhance your sexual experience?

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Is there anything you would like to change?

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Are you willing to use sex aids/toys to increase your excitement and pleasure? If yes, which ones would you like to try?

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Is it important to you who initiates sexual intimacy? If yes, who should initiate and in what manner?

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Is there anything in particular you would like more or less of during foreplay? Explain.

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What would make your sexual experiences with your partner more exciting?

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What are some solutions to the excuses that you are "too busy" or "too tired" to have sex?

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Are there feelings or situations that impact your sex life? (For example: conflict, children at home, work schedule)

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After you have learned about your partner's point of view on sexual intimacy, describe activities and changes to enhance your sexual experience:

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Fostering Closeness in Your Relationship

## Objective

To increase closeness and intimacy by doing more together.

## You Should Know

Most couples say that they feel closest when they do things together. It is not just the activity itself, but closeness also comes from planning the activity and creating a shared interest and shared memories.

Consider these suggestions:

- Try saying no to outside activities that take too much time and energy away from your relationship. Even if they are activities you enjoy, try to limit the amount of time you put into them.
- Try community service or volunteer together.
- Do things you used to do when you were dating.
- Take a class together.
- Explore activity groups in your area using sites like Facebook or Meetup.com.
- Introduce your partner to your favorite activity.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down six activities you think would be enjoyable for you and your partner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

Over the next two weeks, plan to do some of these activities. Use the following chart to track your activities. In the outcome section, describe how you and your partner responded, including thoughts, feelings, and reactions to each activity.

Date	Activity	Outcome

Did participating in activities foster closeness between you and your partner? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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## **Section Four: Enhance Understanding and Support**



# Thinking About the Roles in Your Relationship

## Objective

To boost satisfaction with the roles each partner experiences in their relationship.

## You Should Know

People enter relationships with ideas of how they should act and interact within the roles and behaviors of the relationship. Sometimes ideas and expectations are similar, and sometimes they are very different. Problems can arise when couples have different ideas about their roles within their relationship.

Understanding and discussing roles is an important step for couples who find themselves with different ideas or expectations. From understanding, accepting, and respecting differences, steps can be taken to honor each person's desires about the roles they play in their relationship.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

<b>Your role(s)</b>	<b>Do you do this by choice?</b>	<b>What skills do you have that support this role?</b>	<b>Is this a traditional male/female role?</b>

Which roles do you enjoy?

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Which roles do you dislike?

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Which roles do you think your partner enjoys?

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Which roles do you think your partner dislikes?

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Are you willing to switch roles with your partner? If so, which roles? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Understanding Your Partner's Point of View

## Objective

To become more empathic by strengthening your listening skills.

## You Should Know

If you grew up in a home where everyone frequently argued and no one seemed to listen to one another, you might be prone thinking you always have to be right in your relationship. However, sometimes couples argue about who's right or wrong, as if there is only one way of approaching a problem or issue. In fact, it's normal to have different opinions and reactions to events and experiences in your life. This can be a wonderful, lively part of a healthy relationship—sharing one's point of view and learning about another's.

If you're the type of person who gets defensive or critical or always has to be "right," hearing and understanding your partner's different point of view can be challenging. You don't have to *agree* with everything your partner says or believes, but it would be helpful to learn some new skills for listening without judgment and letting your partner know you hear them. Your relationship can grow and thrive as a result.

These tips can help you improve your listening skills:

**Practice active listening.** This means that you consciously try to hear not just the words your partner is saying but also the underlying meaning or message they might be trying to convey. Active listening has several components:

- Pay full attention to your partner, with no distractions. Make direct eye contact.
- As you listen, don't also formulate what you would like to say back. If that is challenging, try repeating the words you're hearing inside your mind to help you focus.
- Do not interrupt. This might take a while to learn, but keep at it. Take a deep breath instead.
- Show your partner that you're listening through nods or smiles or saying "mm-hmm."
- Unfold your arms or open up your body posture to be more physically open.
- Reflect aloud on what you're hearing. Reflecting in this way is like holding up a mirror to your partner in the moment. For example, "What I hear you saying is ...," or "It sounds like you're saying ..." If you're not clear about what to reflect, you might say, "Can you say that again?" or "I'm not sure I'm understanding you exactly. Is this what you mean...?"

**Learn to respond nondefensively.** Noticing what comes up for you is an important step toward responding to your partner more positively and effectively. Are you wanting to share a different viewpoint? Can you hold your own viewpoint *and* your partner's view at the same time? This awareness will help you as you express yourself in response to your partner.

- It's okay to share your honest opinions, but your partner will be more likely to "hear" you and feel "heard" if you do so with compassion and respect.
- Use "I" statements, not "you" statements. Rather than "You should pay more attention to me," try saying "I'd really like to spend more time with you and be connected."
- Avoid generalizing to other situations. This comes up most often with the words "always" and "never," as in "You always leave your clothes on the floor," or "You never help me around the house." Ask yourself, is this actually true? Flip this around to an "I" statement, as in "I feel annoyed when I have to ask you to help me with the dishes. What can we do to divide the chores more fairly?"
- Give your partner positive feedback for expressing their point of view: "Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me," "I'm so glad to know how you feel about this," "It helps me to know that you feel different about this, so I can work to understand you better."

**Invest time and effort in building positive, empathic communication.** Most people have busy lives and find it hard to sit down together to listen, talk, share deeply, or resolve conflicts. Too many couples get into major arguments via text messaging, where tone and intent can easily be misunderstood.

- Make a "date" with your partner to talk in person at a mutually convenient time. This may take some juggling at first, but it will be worth it.
- Agree to set strict limits on texting about a thorny issue. Defer disagreements until you are together, in person, with no (or minimal) distractions.
- Try not to work things out right before bedtime, when you might be emotionally tired.
- Let your partner know you want to work hard to build more positive communication. Just hearing that you are motivated to change can be meaningful to them.

Practice these tips the next time you notice that you and your partner are having a disagreement.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

In the next week or two, notice your communications and keep a log of them in the following chart.

Event or situation/conflict	What skill did you practice?	What happened?

It is normal for old, habitual ways of communicating to come up when learning new skills. Write about a situation this week where you noticed that you became defensive or did not listen openly and caringly to your partner's point of view.

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What could you have done or said differently to be more open to their point of view? Be specific.

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What would you like to tell your partner about your wish to communicate more positively as a couple? Be specific.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Maintaining Your Identity

## Objective

To enhance your relationship while maintaining your identity.

## You Should Know

Early in a relationship, you and your partner might want to share everything, do everything together, and develop common interests to create a strong foundation for the future. Gradually, you “merge” into a couple, and that sense of merging might lead you to feel like you are losing your identity—or losing yourself in the relationship. You might let go of passions, hobbies, or goals you had prior to entering the relationship. As time goes on, you might begin to grow resentful, anxious, or even hopeless, causing you to express yourself in unhealthy ways, and ultimately threatening the connection.

When each partner supports and respects each other’s different interests, personal growth is enhanced and the relationship flourishes. Ideally, you create an interdependent relationship, where you and your partner are reliant on each other while maintaining autonomous identities.

Your relationship goal is to maintain an identity as a separate person, while creating intimacy, closeness, and connection with your partner. Research indicates that partners who maintain their identities within their romantic relationships are happier and more optimistic. They also have a stronger sense of themselves, allowing them to be capable of more intimacy, love, and passion.

These suggestions can help you maintain your identity in your relationship:

- Pursue your own goals for professional development.
- Continue connections and friendships you had when you were single.
- Make time for your own hobbies and interests.
- Encourage your partner to maintain interests and connections.
- Recognize the things you enjoy and the things that matter to you.
- Ask your partner for what you want.
- Say no to your partner regarding things you do not want (or do not want to do).
- Spend time with your friends and family—without your partner.
- Take time alone for yourself.



Maintaining your identity is critical to establishing a long-lasting, healthy relationship, so focusing equally on both attending to yourself and making the relationship work is necessary.

### **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Identify activities, hobbies, friendships, or goals you have neglected or let go of since entering your relationship.

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Have you noticed any changes in yourself as a result? Explain.

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What interests, causes, and values do you find the most rewarding and meaningful? Explain.

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Do you feel comfortable expressing your needs and desires with your partner? Why or why not?

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Are you able to find other sources to get what you want if your partner cannot, or will not, provide them? Explain.

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Do you feel comfortable rejecting a suggestion or request from your partner and then explaining your reasons? Why or why not? Are you able to find ways to compromise with your partner?

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With whom would you like to reconnect or spend more quality time? How might these people enhance your life?

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Of the activities, hobbies, and interests you identified, which would you like to take up again? What new activities or interests would you like to try? What steps can you take to make that happen?

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What goals would you like to create or reignite for your career, health, self-improvement, or self-care? Who are the people in your life who can best support you?

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What are some ways you can decompress and find quiet time on your own?

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Which actions do you think will be most helpful to maintain your identity in your relationship?  
Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Improving Your Listening Skills

## Objective

To better understand your partner's needs and feelings by improving your listening skills.

## You Should Know

Sometimes it is easy to be distracted by your thoughts, feelings, and opinions while your partner is talking. When you are not fully engaged in listening, you may miss important elements being expressed by your partner, including their needs, emotions, and opinions. Your understanding of what is being said, as well as your ability to respond effectively and appropriately, is negatively impacted.

When you actively listen to your partner, you are fully engaged in the conversation. You are able to process what is being said and validate their needs and feelings. Here are some suggested techniques for improving your listening skills:

- **Pay attention.** Shut off your cell phone, television, or other form of distraction. Look your partner in the eye. Avoid multitasking.
- **Observe.** Pay attention to your partner's body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, especially if it contradicts what is being said.
- **Reflect back.** Repeat what your partner said to make sure you understand. Avoid using judgmental language or tone.
- **Get clarification.** If you are not sure what your partner wants and needs after you reflect back, ask for more information: "I'm not sure I understand your point about this situation. Could you say more about it?"
- **Empathize.** Try to understand your partner's perspective. Imagine what it might feel like to have these concerns, thoughts, and emotions.
- **Acknowledge.** Acknowledge that you have heard and understood your partner's perspective and emotions. Validate their experience without trying to "fix" anything: "I heard you say that you are feeling really overwhelmed at work."
- **Ask questions.** Gather more information so you can offer solutions, compromises, or support to your partner. This is also helpful to determine whether they are looking for suggestions or just want someone to listen. For example,
  - What is your main concern about this issue?
  - How does this situation make you feel?
  - What do you think needs to change?
  - What solutions have you tried?

- What can I do that will be helpful?
- Would it be helpful for me to offer a suggestion or resource?

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Review this list and check off any of the following that you have noticed yourself doing during conversations:

- \_\_\_ **Mind reading.** Assuming that you know what your partner is thinking and feeling.
- \_\_\_ **Preparing.** Planning how you will respond while your partner is still talking, so that you miss what is being said.
- \_\_\_ **Filtering.** Listening only to the things that you find important or that directly affect you.
- \_\_\_ **Judging.** Forming opinions on your partner and what they say, instead of trying to understand their point of view.
- \_\_\_ **Daydreaming.** Getting distracted by memories, worries, or your imagination while your partner is talking.
- \_\_\_ **Advising.** Offering suggestions and answers instead of listening and showing support.
- \_\_\_ **Arguing.** Disputing, challenging, or debating what your partner says.
- \_\_\_ **Being right.** Denying or rejecting anything your partner says that implies that you are wrong or need to change.
- \_\_\_ **Derailing.** Changing the subject when your partner says something that threatens or upsets you.
- \_\_\_ **Placating.** Agreeing with your partner before hearing their feelings or concerns, in an attempt to avoid confrontation or discussion.

Think of a recent situation when you used one of those approaches in a conversation. Describe what happened.

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What was the outcome of that conversation? What was your level of understanding of what your partner said and implied? Did you respond or react the way your partner expected? What feedback, if any, did you receive from your partner?

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Think back to the situation you just described. Which of the above listening techniques would have been helpful in that situation? What could you have said or done differently? In what way could that have changed the outcome?

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Which listening technique(s) will be most effective for you during an upcoming conversation?

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Practice your selected listening techniques by role-playing that conversation with a friend or family member you trust. Then describe what the experience was like for you. What was easy? What was difficult? How did you feel afterward?

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Ask your role-play partner to describe how they experienced your listening techniques. Did they feel heard or understood? Did they notice how much attention you were paying to them?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Practicing Active Listening Techniques

## Objective

To become a more effective listener through the use of active listening techniques.

## You Should Know

Active listening is an extremely useful way to improve relationships. It requires each partner to fully concentrate, understand, respond and then remember what is being said by the other. The following techniques are the fundamentals of active listening, and they take some practice.

Technique	Purpose	How to do this	Example
Encouraging	To convey interest. To encourage your partner to keep talking.	Don't argue or disagree. Use neutral words. Use varying voice intonations	"Can you tell me more ...?"
Clarifying	To help you better understand what is said. To get more information. To help your partner see other views.	Ask questions. Restate wrong interpretations to encourage your partner to explain further.	"When did this happen?"
Restating	To show you are listening and understanding. To check your meaning and interpretation.	Restate basic ideas and facts.	"So, you would like your parents to trust you more, is that right?"
Reflecting	To show you understand how your partner feels. To help your partner evaluate their own feelings.	State your understanding of your partner's feelings.	"You seem very upset."



Summarizing	To review progress. To pull together important ideas and facts. To establish a basis for further discussion.	Restate major ideas expressed, including feelings.	“These seem to be the key ideas you’ve expressed ...”
Validating	To acknowledge the worthiness of your partner.	Show appreciation for their efforts and actions.	“I appreciate your willingness to resolve this matter.”

### What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Choose a few of the active listening techniques to practice over the next two weeks. Use the following chart to track what happened, how your partner responded, and the outcome.

Date	What happened?	How did your partner respond?	Outcome


Did the use of active listening techniques improve your relationship with your partner? Explain.

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What techniques were the most helpful? Describe.

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Interpreting Body Language

## Objective

To improve your communication with your partner by increasing your understanding of body language.

## You Should Know

Although strong communication skills involve expressing yourself clearly and listening attentively, sometimes what you say does not always indicate what you actually mean or feel. It is the nonverbal communication of body language, that often provides the most accurate information about thoughts and emotions.

Facial expressions, posture, and tone of voice offer important clues. The signals you send with your own body language can help your partner understand your mood and intentions. When you pay attention to physical signals, you are less likely to project your own emotions onto your partner, or to misinterpret their feelings. This is especially helpful during conflict or challenging interactions when you might experience overwhelming thoughts and emotions.

By understanding body language—both your own and your partner’s—you will be able to communicate more clearly and respond appropriately to difficult conversations and interactions. Here are some common physical cues and the emotions they convey.

Physical cues	Emotions
Eye contact or gazing into the eyes	Attention, caring, affection
Smiling, clapping hands, singing, jumping up and down or dancing, laughing	Joy, excitement, happiness
Red flushed face and neck, clenched hands, pursed lips, crossed arms, hands on hips, looking down or away, clenched teeth, frowning, staring	Anger, dislike, annoyance, aggression
Frowning, looking down or away, slumped posture; low, quiet, or monotone voice	Sadness, hurt
Talking quickly and nervously, inability to sit still, shaking, pacing, speechlessness, crossed arms, freezing in place, sweating	Anxiety, nervousness, fear
Covering face, hiding, slumping, looking down or away.	Shame, embarrassment, guilt

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down any other expressions of body language you can think of and what emotions they convey.

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Think of a time that you realized your partner was angry, sad, happy, or anxious, based on their facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Describe the physical signals you noticed.

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Think of a time that you realized your partner was not paying attention as you spoke to them, based on their facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Describe the physical signals you noticed.

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When a person's nonverbal communication seems confusing or is difficult to interpret, there are some questions you can ask to get more clarity:

- "You look upset. Is everything all right?"
- "I notice that you seem nervous. Am I correct?"
- "How are you feeling?"
- "Are things okay between us?"

Can you think of other clarifying questions? List them here.

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Now, focus on your own body language and what it conveys about your moods and feelings. Has your partner ever told you that your words did not match your body language? Explain.

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Think of a time when your partner seemed to understand that you were mad (or sad, anxious, and so on), in spite of what you said or did not say. Explain.

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Next, think of a recent challenging interaction you had with your partner. What happened? What was said?

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Describe your emotions.

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Describe any physical sensations you experienced.

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Describe any facial expressions, posture, and movements you remember expressing.

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Describe your partner's facial expressions, posture, and movements.

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Describe how you interpreted your partner's emotions.

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Did your partner's body language make it easier to understand what they were thinking and feeling? Explain.

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Did your partner's body language impact the way you responded? Explain.

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Think of an upcoming situation where increasing your awareness of body language will be helpful in communicating effectively. Describe.

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What body language would you most like to increase or improve, for future interactions? Why?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Identifying Unrealistic Expectations

## Objective

To manage your expectations in your relationship.

## You Should Know

Reasonable expectations for your relationship might include trust, honesty, kindness, mutual respect, and equality. Reasonable expectations build the foundation for healthy relationships. On the other hand, unreasonable expectations sometimes lead to disappointment, upset, and even resentment.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

These statements are examples of unrealistic relationship expectations, and yet some people may still have them. Check off whether you have had these expectations in the past, and if you still have them.

My partner will meet all my needs for companionship.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

Time will resolve any problems we may have.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

If I have to ask for something, it is not as meaningful.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No



Less romance means we have less love for one another.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

My partner's interest in sex must be the same as mine.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

We will always do things just like my family did.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

Arguing and disagreements are a sign that there is a problem in the relationship.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

I believe I know everything there is to know about my partner.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

Love is all you need for a great relationship.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

Keeping silent about something bothering me is better than causing unnecessary problems in our relationship.

Did you believe this in the beginning of your relationship?  Yes  No

Now?  Yes  No

Do you think you have expectations about your relationship that are unreasonable and possibly harmful? List some examples.

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What can you do to change your unreasonable expectations?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# The GIVE Approach to Interpersonal Effectiveness

## Objective

To lower your emotional reactivity and become more aware of your partner's emotional needs.

## You Should Know

When you experience distress in your relationship, it is sometimes hard to know what to do or how to solve the problem. You might expend a lot of energy blaming your partner or trying to get them to change, only to be rejected over and over. You might be overly focused on your needs and wants, to the exclusion of your partner's needs and wants. The good news is that you can improve your approach to resolving conflicts and getting what you want in your relationship.

One approach is called GIVE: **G**entle, **I**nterested, **V**alidating, **E**asy Manner. This approach is aimed at helping you lower your emotional upset or reactivity and learning to be more aware of your partner's needs and wants.

- **Gentle** means that you will practice using a soft voice, speaking respectfully, and avoiding arguments. You can learn not to be bossy or a bully, if that is a problem for you. You can remain calm and say nice things to your partner rather than blaming or criticizing them.
- **Interested** refers to taking the opportunity to really pay deep attention to your partner. What are they saying? Are you hearing their words or just thinking about what you want to say back? Try listening and lowering the volume on your own thoughts and desires. Make good eye contact. Don't interrupt. Smile.
- **Validating** has to do with being aware of your partner's feelings as well as your own—and letting them know you hear them. You can even say "I hear you" in a kind way. Validate for them that what they are asking for or dealing with is their truth and that they are entitled to their feelings.
- **Easy manner** goes beyond learning to be a gentle, kind, active listener who validates your partner. This aspect refers to being goofy or fun or silly sometimes. Lighten up. Try not to take everything so seriously. Let your partner see you as someone they can approach and maybe ask for help or advice. Let yourself ask for and receive advice from them too.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down the primary concerns or problems you are currently experiencing with your partner.

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How could you be gentle in a situation with your partner?

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How could you communicate interest in a situation with your partner?

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How could you be validating in a situation with your partner?

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How could you adopt an easy manner in a situation with your partner?

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In the next week or so, use the following chart to keep track of any situations when you used the GIVE approach to help you interact with your partner more effectively. Note the date, the specific situation, what you wanted, the skills you used, and the outcome.

Date	Situation	What did you want?	What GIVE skills did you use?	Outcome

Did this exercise help you reduce your emotional reactivity? Explain.

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What was the most helpful aspect of the GIVE approach? Describe.

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What are some other situations where you might use the GIVE approach?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Sharing Things as a Couple

## Objective

To increase closeness by identifying activities you enjoy together.

## You Should Know

When couples are going through a difficult time, they often concentrate on their differences rather than on the things they have in common and the activities they like to share. Focusing on the things you enjoy together and talking about what you have in common can help bring you closer.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Music we both like:

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Hobbies or activities we both enjoy:

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TV shows we both watch:

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Games we both like to play:

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Outdoor activities we both enjoy:

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Unique interests we share:

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Restaurants we both like:

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Other things we enjoy doing together:

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After identifying your similarities and activities you both enjoy, discuss with your partner. Did you feel closer to your partner after this discussion? Why or why not?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Practicing Forgiveness

## Objective

To heal and strengthen your relationship by learning to forgive.

## You Should Know

All couples experience situations that lead to hurt, disappointment, misunderstanding, or painful exchanges. Marital offenses can be minor (like forgetting to run an errand) or major (like infidelity, addiction, or abuse). When your partner causes significant harm to your relationship, whether deliberately or accidentally, choosing forgiveness can be challenging. Taking the time to seek and grant forgiveness plays an important role in healing and strengthening your relationship.

Couples may be more likely to forgive each other if they

- understand why their partner “did wrong”—through clear communication and reflective listening;
- can empathize with their partner’s position or point of view;
- avoid projecting their anger, resentment, sadness toward their partner;
- reflect on times when they hurt someone, and treat forgiveness of another person as forgiveness of themselves;
- draw from spiritual, religious, and/or cultural teachings;
- review the negative consequences of holding a grudge.

**Forgiveness is not** letting your partner off the hook. It is not about condoning, forgetting, or accepting hurtful behavior. It is possible to forgive your partner without minimizing or denying that an offense was committed. Forgiveness may not involve reconciliation, as this might be unsafe or impossible. Misconceptions surrounding the process of forgiveness may be potentially harmful, especially when abuse is involved. Also, forgiveness may not be a quick process—avoid rushing your partner if they require days or even months to work through this process—especially if the offense was serious.

**Forgiveness is** the conscious decision to give up the right for vengeance, retribution, or negative thoughts toward the “offender” in order to release resentment, bitterness, anger, and other negative emotions. You recognize your hurt and pain and you make the choice to let it go. This process promotes emotional healing and restoration of inner peace—and it may also allow for full reconciliation. Research indicates that forgiving is good for you—mentally, emotionally, and physically. Research has also shown that forgiveness lowers blood pressure and heart rate and reduces anger—as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety. Happiness and hopefulness is enhanced, and relationships become healthier and more stable. People who consciously forgive experience higher levels of empathy and more positive feelings toward other people.

Choosing to remain in a state of “unforgiveness” creates physical stress; your heart beats faster and your blood pressure increases. Anxiety, depression, and stress may lead to pain, fatigue, and even self-harm. Individuals who maintain grudges or have difficulty with self-forgiveness may also be more likely to engage in risky and dangerous behavior (for example, substance and alcohol abuse). Studies show that people who hold grudges experience compromised immune systems. If you harbor resentment, bitterness, and rage—and allow these feelings fester and expand over time—your health may be negatively impacted. Holding on to negative emotions, even self-directed emotions, can lead to a decline in emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

If you are seeking forgiveness:

- Carefully reflect on your mistake and admit what you did was wrong or hurtful.
- Make an attempt to understand and empathize with the hurt you have caused.
- Take responsibility for your behavior and make restitution if required.
- Assure your partner that you will not do it again.
- Sincerely apologize and ask for forgiveness.
- Forgive yourself. (Recent research indicates that people who do not forgive themselves experience a reduction in empathy and they may be less inclined to make amends.)

If you are granting forgiveness:

- Identify and acknowledge your feelings.
- Be specific about your future expectations and limits.
- Give up your desire to get even, but be very clear about how you wish to be treated in the future.
- Release all blame, resentment, shaming, and negativity that is directed toward your partner.
- Communicate your forgiveness to your partner.
- Work toward reconciliation (if appropriate).

Many couples struggle with the decision to forgive because they know they have the “right” to be angry. Consciously choosing to forgive means letting go of *all* resentments to benefit you and repair your relationship.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

How do you define forgiveness?

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Circle any of these that you experienced. Add feelings or behaviors that aren't listed:

**Painful emotions** (anger or shame)

**Changed behavior** (loss of interest in sex/intimacy)

**Changed worldview** (inability to trust)

**Cognitive rehearsal** (recurring negative thoughts)

**Practical costs** (time or money)

**Physical harm** (injuries from abuse)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your experience, including the emotions you felt.

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What are the pros and cons of forgiving your partner?

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Describe how things might be different if you decide to forgive your partner.

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Respond to one of these prompts:

- What was life like for your partner when they were growing up? Might this have an impact on their behavior as an adult?
- What is life currently like for your partner?

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How do you currently feel about your partner? Describe your positive and negative feelings. Have your feelings changed over time?

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If you have chosen to forgive your partner, how has that benefitted you? Consider how forgiveness has affected your emotional and mental health. Have you experienced any behavioral changes?

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Describe what you have learned through this experience, including your efforts to forgive and repair your relationship (either with your partner or with yourself). How has your worldview changed?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Expressing Gratitude

## Objective

To strengthen your relationship through the expression of gratitude.

## You Should Know

As relationships age and mature, it is normal for couples to get comfortable and start taking each other for granted. Researchers have found that expressing gratitude to your partner can lead to a longer lasting, more committed relationship. Findings have shown that those who appreciated their partners were more responsive to their partner's needs and more devoted to their relationships.

Displays of gratitude create more connectedness, happiness, and satisfaction for both partners. When you express gratitude toward your partner, you increase the chances that they will act warm and loving to you. Furthermore, when you feel grateful for your partner, you are more likely to increase your loving behaviors toward them and to value your relationship on a deeper level.

Gratitude means appreciating not only what your partner *does*, but who they *are* as a person. In other words, you are thankful that your partner took your kids to soccer practice—and appreciative of their thoughtfulness in noticing how busy you were. As you become more aware of the positive things your partner does, you will naturally increase your gratitude for them.

There are many ways to express gratitude and appreciation for your partner:

- Find little ways to show you are thinking of them: a text, a short email, a note in their wallet.
- Acknowledge the little things your partner does in your daily lives that are kind, thoughtful, or loving—and might otherwise go unnoticed. Thank them for taking out the trash, filling the car's gas tank, or starting dinner.
- Compliment your partner for a trait that you appreciate and find attractive, lovable, or admirable.
- Express yourself through physical touch. Even just holding your partner's hand or touching their arm shows you care and conveys intimacy and attraction.
- Do something thoughtful for your partner. The more heartfelt and genuine the gesture is, the more meaningful it will be to your partner.
- Break the routine by taking on a chore or task that is usually your partner's responsibility.
- Share your success. For example, if you received a promotion or earned a degree, acknowledge your partner's supportive and encouraging role in your achievement.

In addition to these expressions of gratitude, simply telling your partner that you are thankful for them can positively impact your relationship. Use descriptions and details to express what you appreciate about your partner, and how it positively affects your life. Try using phrases such as “I appreciate it when you ...”, “I am thankful for ...”, “I love it when you ...”, or “I am grateful for ...”

## **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

What do you love, respect, and value most about your partner?

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What makes your partner unique and interesting?

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What is your partner’s best quality?

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How do you plan to express gratitude to your partner? Describe.

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Write down two statements of gratitude you would like to express to your partner.

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Has this exercise helped you identify ways to express gratitude for your partner? Explain.

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Has this exercise helped improve the level of appreciation that you and your partner have for each other? Explain.

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# Learning to Appreciate Your Partner

## Objective

To increase your appreciation of your partner through daily reflection.

## You Should Know

Over time, many couples begin to take their relationship for granted. One element that is sometimes lost is appreciation for one another. You do not have to wait for your partner to appreciate you more. Instead, you can take steps to identify what you appreciate about your partner and to express your positive feelings to them.

Consider what your partner adds to your life. Each day, notice at least three ways in which your partner positively contributes to you or your relationship. These things do not have to be dramatic or big. It might be the way they smile at you, or the fact that they make coffee for you every morning. Think back to when you first met your partner. What qualities and strengths did you find most attractive? In all likelihood, those strengths and qualities still exist today.

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Complete this form for one week.

	Three things I appreciated about my partner today	Three ways my partner contributed to my life today	Three ways my partner demonstrated their strengths and qualities
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			

<b>Thursday</b>			
<b>Friday</b>			
<b>Saturday</b>			
<b>Sunday</b>			

When you are done, rate these statements on these on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = don't agree at all, and 10 = strongly agree.

\_\_\_\_\_ It was easy for me to find things to appreciate about my partner each day.

\_\_\_\_\_ This exercise helped me see how much my partner positively contributes to my life.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner uses their strengths consistently, and I could easily identify what those strengths were.

\_\_\_\_\_ I verbalized my appreciation to my partner each day.

\_\_\_\_\_ My partner expressed their appreciation to me every day.

Now answer these questions:

What are some ways your partner expressed appreciation to you?

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Was there anything that surprised you?

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Can you think of some things you might have done differently to express your appreciation to your partner during this week?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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# The Couples Communication Workbook

When couples seek help from a therapist or counselor, they are often at a crisis point in their relationship. Typically, something has brought them to a point where they can think of no alternative but to see a professional for guidance. In most cases, the crisis is related to some deep-rooted problems in the relationship, and these can be solved only when each partner commits to finding new ways to identify sources of stress, implement practical solutions for decreasing conflict, deepen emotional intimacy, and enhance understanding and support.

Ongoing homework assignments is an important way of teaching the skills that will address the crisis while rebuilding a foundation for a happier and more fulfilling relationship. In completing these assignments, couples can rehearse new communication strategies and challenge harmful beliefs, strengthening the insights that surface during counseling sessions. In addition to giving the therapeutic work context and focus, homework provides concrete feedback for the counselor about a couple's progress.

This book offers fifty-two worksheets that will help couples learn strategies to manage their emotions in constructive ways, instead of turning to behaviors that erode their relationship.

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#### **About the Author:**

Angela M. Doel, M.S., is a writer and director of operations at Between Sessions Resources. She has served in various clinical supervisory positions and worked as a family therapist. Ms. Doel earned her M.S. in Counseling Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She holds an advanced certificate in nutritional counseling, and her areas of specialization are health education and eating disorders.

#### **About the Series:**

The Couples Communication Workbook is part of a series of workbooks designed to give therapists and their clients easy access to practical evidence-based psychotherapy tools. Each workbook represents a complete treatment program.