

How Do You Know When You've Crossed the Line with Your Partner?

Objective: To identify harmful or verbally abusive patterns in your communication patterns toward your partner and learn healthier ways of approaching conflicts.

You Should Know

Sometimes we say things that are so hurtful to a partner it is impossible to "take them back." When you mock or put down your partner, or 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 that 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 spouse or partner.

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

This worksheet is designed to help you think about the things you have said in the past to your partner that have "crossed the line" and undermined your relationship. It's not easy to hold a mirror up to the things you have done that may have hurt your partner, so congratulate yourself for taking the first step toward being a better partner, and a better person. The worksheet concludes with positive ways to communicate with your partner.

What to Do

First, let's look at the ways in which people can cross the line verbally with someone else. 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.

1. 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 name, including swearing or cursing? Note them here.

2. **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 below.

3. **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 are a slob,” “You are so scatterbrained, no wonder you can’t find the keys again,” and so on. Note here any patterns of criticizing your partner that you can recall.

4. **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 here examples of condescending or sarcastic things you have said to your partner.

5. **Humiliating your partner.** This form of verbal abuse can seriously undermine your partner’s confidence and self-esteem. Are any of the following phrases or themes familiar? “You aren’t even worth paying attention to, you’re so miserable,” “Who would want you? You’re fatter than that 600-pound guy on TV,” “You don’t even know how to stand up for yourself, you’re so weak.” Note your own phrases below.

6. 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 below.

7. Acting jealous or accusatory. Perhaps you’ve found yourself accusing your partner of things that 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 below times when you might have been accusatory toward your partner.

8. Isolating or withdrawing. Perhaps instead of being verbally critical or accusatory, you do things like refuse to talk to your partner, storm out of the house, or avoid answering texts or phone calls. Note below times when you may have crossed the line by withholding, withdrawing, or isolating in your relationship.

9. Threatening your partner. This form of verbal abuse is a strong sign that you are trying to control your partner. If you have said or done the following things in relation to your partner, note them below. Please consider finding a mental health professional who can help you learn healthier ways of communicating before things get even worse. Statements such as “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.

Important Note: 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. Consult your nearest Domestic Violence Hotline and stop the cycle.

Positive Strategies for Positive Communication

Habitual ways of communicating can be hard to undo. But with awareness and practice, you can improve! As noted above, if you feel it's too difficult to do on your own, or if you are at risk for escalating into threatening or physically abusive behavior, please seek professional help.

- 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, that is, put yourself in the other'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.
- Do some research about "active listening," that is, how to be a better, more open-minded, open-hearted listener.

More to Think About

1. It is normal for old, habitual ways of communicating to come up when learning new skills. Write below a situation this week in which you noticed that you backed off from using harsh words toward your partner. What was difficult about that? What was easy?

2. Reflect on your own (or with a mental health professional, if desired) about your own upbringing and the roots of your tendency to use words harshly. Be specific.

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

How helpful was this exercise? _____

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

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
