

Communication Basics for Spouses

Compliment Frequently. Spouses never tire of hearing good things said to and about them. Just as the spouses said in courtship, “You look terrific,” “It’s wonderful to be hanging out with you,” or “You did a great job,” it is important that spouses continue frequent compliments to each other.

Compliment the Spouse in Front of Others. In addition to saying good things to each other in private, there is an added value for spouses complimenting each other when with others. Bragging about each other, telling others what a great cook or punctual or responsible the partner is sends sweetness into the marital air. The spouses not only bask in the delight of each other but in the smiles of friends who smirk and roll their eyes in disbelief.

Make Words and Body Language Congruent. Messages are most clear when the spouses’ words match their body language. Saying, “Okay, you are right” accompanied by a smile and an embrace reflects using both words and body language to convey the same message. In contrast, saying “Okay, you are right” but leaving the room and slamming the door communicate a very different message. Spouses need to ensure that what they say and their body language convey the same message.

Gripe Productively. A key element of communication between spouses is emotional connection. Communication is not talking about the weather but talking about the delight in being with each other, making plans for the future, and yes, telling each other what he/she would like the other to do to enhance your life together. A modest degree of fault-finding between spouses is actually functional – the partners remain realistic about themselves and their relationship and, by doing so, keep the relationship on course and in orbit. By listening to and airing each other’s critical thoughts, the spouses alert each other to behavioral changes each would like for the other to begin. Not all gripe sessions will result neatly in, “Ok honey, I’ll be glad to change that about myself. Anything else?” but they keep the marital air fresh and clean. Spouses who don’t air gripes hide their resentment, which often surfaces elsewhere – not talking, less intimacy, and less sex.

But griping must be the right kind. Productive griping requires that each spouse make clear and specific future positive behavior he/she would like the other to engage in. These conversations give the partners a roadmap of what to do to keep their partner happy. Destructive griping is a useless harangue; it leaves the spouses depressed and resentful since their partner just unloaded on them but did not specify what new behaviors they wanted to see. Some examples of productive and destructive griping are:

Productive Griping	Destructive Griping
<i>Please leave the gas tank at least a quarter full when you take the car out.</i>	<i>You are always inconsiderate. You always bring the car home on empty.</i>
<i>Please be on time when we plant to meet someplace or call me if you will be late.</i>	<i>You can’t be depended on for anything. You are always late and don’t care about my feelings.</i>
<i>Please clean up the kitchen on Saturdays before noon.</i>	<i>You think I am your maid and cook and you never help me with anything.</i>

Focus on Future. Notice that each of the items listed under Productive Griping column is specific to a behavior in the future. The spouses should be encouraged not to drone on about past behavior that is upsetting but to focus on what they want to happen in the future. Not only are their gripes to be future-focused (something the partner can actually change), they are to be behaviorally specific. Asking the partner to “respect me” is not behaviorally specific and relies on the partner to guess what to do. This is not helpful. Being asked to leave a half a tank of gas in the car, be on time, and clean the kitchen are clear.

Keep the Process of Communication Going. Communication is both content and process. While content is the word spouses use, process is the interaction between partners. It is important that spouses not be discouraged by difficult content so that one or both shuts down and stomps out of the room. When your partner tells you something upsetting, it can be difficult to hear. But the advantage of your partner telling you what you did that upset them is that your partner's thoughts are now out in the open rather than stirring in a stew of resentment. To keep such open-ness in your relationship, it is important for you to let your partner know that you value such disclosure by saying something like, "It know it wasn't easy for you to tell me what I did that upset you, but I'm glad you told me. I need to know what you are thinking."

Ask "Honest Questions." Good communication also involves asking honest questions. An *honest question* is a question that you ask someone with the intent of really wanting to know the answer (Madsen). In effect, you don't have an answer that you want to hear and don't get mad at whatever the person answers. A *dishonest question* has a preset answer. Suppose one spouse asks the other, "Do you want to go see my parents this weekend?" If the question is honest (the spouse really wants to know how their mate feels), the answer can be, "Are you kidding? Seeing your parents is the perfect way to stress me out." If the question is dishonest, and the partner says, "no," the spouse will be mad because a "yes" is really what they wanted to hear. Honest questions are important since they are a genuine attempt to find out what each partner thinks and feels. Other examples of honest and dishonest questions are:

Question	Honest Question if:	Dishonest Question if:
<i>Suppose we have my office workers over for dinner this Saturday night?</i>	Partner can say, "no."	You get angry if answer is "no."
<i>I'd like to buy a new car, is that ok?</i>	Partner can say, "no."	You get angry if answer is "no."
<i>I'd like for us to move, is that ok?</i>	Partner can say, "no."	You get angry if answer is "no."
<i>Can we try to get pregnant this fall?</i>	Partner can say, "no."	You get angry if answer is "no."

Use Reflective Statements. Spouses should also be encouraged to use reflective statements. Good communication also involves the use of reflective statements. These are simply restatements of what each partner says to the other. For example, if he drones on about his boss at work, a good response from the wife might be to reflect what he's seeming to feel, "You feel like you are being manipulated and you are getting angry about it" communicates that the partner is "there" in terms of understanding the mate without being critical ("you are always complaining about something") or ignoring (saying nothing/being silent). Some examples of reflective statements are:

Spouse Says	Reflective Statement	Judgmental Response
<i>Your mother drives me up a wall.</i>	My mom upsets you.	You hate my mom.
<i>Your brother drank too much.</i>	You think Tom overdid it.	You never liked my brother.
<i>You spent too much on the wedding.</i>	You think I went overboard.	You are a tightwad.

Use "I" Statements. When one spouse does something that upsets the other, the use of "I" statements rather than "You" statements is preferable. For example, one spouse might say, "You are always late and you are irresponsible" (a you statement) – instead, say, "I get upset when you are late and would feel less worried if you call me when you are delayed." I-Statements focus on the speaker's feelings and the desirable future behavior rather than blaming the partner.

Consider Measured Honesty. All relationships depend on some level of illusion. Each partner likes to feel loved, respected, and regarded as the unique soul mate. While spouses should communicate real/true feelings to each other, there are some thoughts that should be left out or omitted: measured honesty. "You are getting a fat belly" is likely best kept to one's self since those types of comments are not likely to result in behavior change. Telling your husband he has a beer belly is not going to encourage him to join the gym. Sometimes, kindness is a quality of more value rather than blunt honesty.