

WE CAN COMMUNICATE!

An exercise designed to give couples a satisfying experience of communicating.

A common complaint partners make is that they cannot communicate with each other anymore. It is not because of a lack of trying. It is not because of a lack of hearing the words or not picking up on non-verbal cues. It is because they are not able to truly listening to each other. As a result they feel frustrated, lonely and alienated from each other.

Couples communicate well when:

- they feel safe.
- they feel they are not going to be judged negatively.
- they are not afraid of being punished or attacked.
- they are not going to be made to feel guilty.
- they know they will not be told they are wrong.
- they believe they are going to be understood.
- they know that what they say is not going to be distorted and/or misinterpreted.
- they know that what they say will not be used against them later.
- they are not afraid their partner will withdraw from them.
- they trust that what they are going to say will be kept confidential.
- they know there is no chance a talk will go on for hours, perhaps escalating into a painful argument that they don't know how to stop or make better.
- the listener does not respond with solutions.
(a major mistake couples make while talking is trying to find a solution to a problem when a solution is not what is needed or wanted OR before the real problem has been clearly identified.)

In a couple relationship, each person wants a chance to speak without interruption.

When one interrupts the other, the first speaker's train of thought gets interrupted and the second speaker has already stopped listening. The first speaker then struggles harder to get the airtime to express him or herself. If interrupted too many times, a person may give up trying to talk at all. When you allow your partner to talk without interruption, you encourage him or her to express themselves more fully and on a deeper level. When each partner is allowed to fully and deeply express themselves, couples feel a greater sense of emotional connection.

Healthy couples stay emotionally connected to each other through thick and thin.

Often one partner is more of a talker than the other. This is not a fault of either and is not necessarily a problem to be fixed. In fact, such differences can complement each other. On the other hand, talkers may need to learn not to repeat themselves and to be more comfortable with silence. The quieter partner may need to learn to speak up and take airtime, especially when it's offered. Talkers tend to say something to their partner or ask a question and then immediately start talking again. The quieter partners tend to take too long to respond, unconsciously inviting the talker to start talking again. Each person needs to change a little for communication to improve.

Reflective listening is a powerful communication skill. By reflecting back to your partner what they said, you demonstrate to your partner that you heard more than the words they used—you show that you understand their thoughts and feelings and hear their point of view. To merely say to your partner, "I understand." does not prove that you understand; **reflective listening** does. To be an effective reflective listener you must momentarily put aside your own point of view, put aside your own thoughts and feelings, let go of the concept of right and wrong, and listen with your heart. Reflective listening is far more than hearing the words and repeating them back to your partner; it is letting your partner know you understood their thoughts, feelings and related actions.

Reflective listening requires having the patience to wait your turn.

Each partner wants to be understood by the other. Often what happens is each person tries so hard to get their own point of view across that they cannot hear their partner's point of view. That is, each one tries so hard to get understood that they do not understand their partner. As a result, talking becomes an argument over who is right and who is wrong. Then, arguments escalate into unproductive and hurtful fights.

Reflective listening is different. Reflective listening demonstrates to your partner that you understand them or at least you are trying hard to. It demonstrates your interest and effort to connect on a deeper level. When you truly want to know your partner on a deeper level, your partner will sense it. Then, talking or discussing will not escalate into

fighting, although it may get emotionally charged. Learning reflective listening will lead you to know your partner's inner world. This in turn will lead to your partner wanting to know your inner world.

Getting to know your partner's inner world leads to a healthier relationship.

LEARNING THE SKILL OF REFLECTIVE LISTENING

First of all, for now, put your own point of view aside. 'Putting aside' does not mean your view is unimportant, not valid or does not matter. It means you have your own point of view and you are 'putting it on the shelf' while you are hearing your partner's point of view. When your partner is finished speaking, reflect back to them his or her point of view by saying:

- what they think and believe.
- what they feel (emotion).
- what behaviors they have done, are doing or want to do.
- what they want and need.
- what they value.
- what they feel is important that you know about them.
- what they want you to understand.

It helps if you start the reflection with 'You...'

Examples:

Belief: *You believe couples that have a date night once a week have better relationships.*

Emotion: *You often feel lonely in our relationship.*

Behavior: *You go out with your friends because I'm busy but you would rather be with me.*

Want: *You want to spend more quality time together and not fight so much.*

Value: *You really value honesty in our relationship.*

Importance: *You really want me to know how hard you are trying.*

Understanding: *You understand how busy I am at work and you're doing your best to cope with it.*

While listening show interest, respect and openness.

Make eye contact, give your undivided attention, and be physically open.

Avoid:

- Negative body language: arms folded, rolling eyes, snorting, looking away, or grimacing.
- While reflecting back make a genuine effort and be respectful.
- In a warm tone of voice, reflect back just what you heard.

Avoid:

- Getting caught up in the details or content. Stay focused on your partner's viewpoint and emotions instead.
- Putting your own 'spin' on what your partner is saying when your point of view is different. This can be done non-verbally by being sarcastic, emphasizing specific words or sounding doubtful or blaming.
- Reflecting back more than what was actually said.

TALK, LISTEN AND REFLECT EXERCISE

The overall purpose of this exercise is to give couples an interactive experience that works for them. It is designed to enhance their relationship by changing the way they interact. It may be an experience they have not had before or perhaps had only during courtship.

The purpose of this exercise is to improve communication and emotional connection by:

- Changing the timing and sequencing of talking to each other.
- Shifting from a superficial level to a deeper level of interaction.
- Not focusing on solutions nor 'fixing it'.
- Learning the skill of reflective listening.
- Experiencing the skill of reflective listening.

Strongly Recommend! To create the rich and meaningful experience, follow the structure of the exercise—at least the first time. When you have learned the skills, use the structure or not, as you wish. Or, adapt the structure to your unique couple relationship.

EXERCISE:

Talk, Listen, and Reflect

- STEP 1:** Plan something simple yet fun to do after the 30 minutes of the exercise is up. Choose a topic.
Decide who is A and who is B.
- STEP 2:** Person A talks for 10 minutes (Use all of allotted time). Person B listens silently (clarify only if necessary).
- STEP 3:** Person B talks for 10 minutes (Use all of allotted time). Person A listens silently (clarify only if necessary).
- STEP 4:** Then B reflects back to A her thoughts, feelings and actions about what A talked about. (5 minutes). (No reactions/opinions/solutions).
- STEP 5:** Then A reflects back what he/she heard B talk about. (5 minutes). (No reactions/opinions/solutions).
- STEP 6:** Go and have fun together doing something entirely different. (Do not talk about or discuss what either of you said.)

Learning any new skill requires practice.

At first communicating with Reflective Listening will feel awkward and mechanical. As you learn the skills, you will be able to 'make them their own' and then will use them more naturally. It is better to communicate effectively in a mechanical way than to communicate poorly in a natural way. Remember how you learned to write: At first it was mechanical, awkward and took a lot of effort. But over time your handwriting became second nature. Eventually, how you formed your letters became integrated with your personality creating your own distinctive handwriting. With practice, Reflective Listening can also become spontaneous, natural and part of your own unique way of communicating.

EXERCISE:

Talk, Listen, and Reflect

Example:

Person A: Michael

Person B: Janice

- STEP 1:** For something fun to do afterwards, Michael and Janice decided to go for a walk to their favorite neighborhood ice-cream store and get a gelato. **Each chose a topic. (They began with a topic that was not too heavy or touchy.)** They decided who went first by flipping a coin.
- STEP 2:** Michael took 10 minutes to talk about wanting more affection. He expressed what he has to say in a non-blaming and non-attacking manner. E.g. Instead of saying, “You’re always pulling away from me.” He said, *“When you pull away from me something happens inside of me. I don’t quite know what but I know I don’t feel good.”*
- Janice listened only. Occasionally Janice asked for clarification or asked Michael to repeat something she had not heard. Janice let her body language convey to Michael that she was open to hearing what he had to say even if it was difficult or scary for her.
- STEP 3:** Then Janice talked and Michael listened. Janice talked about wanting to do more activities together. She did not respond to what Michael had talked about. Michael let his body language convey to Janice that he is open to hearing what she had to say. He did not roll his eyes, or make noises while she spoke.
- Each took their whole 10 minutes. There were some short and long silences. This allowed each time to think and expand on what they wanted to say. Not being interrupted allowed each to focus on what they wanted to say. Given this opportunity, each one said more than they usually said.

EXERCISE CONTINUED:

STEP 4: For 5 minutes, Janice reflected back to Michael what she heard him say. She kept going until Michael was satisfied with the accuracy of her reflection.

STEP 5: For 5 minutes, Michael reflected back to Janice what he heard her say. He kept going until Janice was satisfied with the accuracy of his reflection.

Only a reflection of what had been heard was given. Neither Michael nor Janice gave any reactions to what was said or responded defensively. They did not argue with what each other had said. What was said was regarded as his or her own truth in that moment.

STEP 6: Michael and Janice had fun walking to the ice cream store and enjoyed their favorite gelato flavors while chatting about other things.

Feeling heard and understood promotes emotional connection and engagement which in turns leads to an increased curiosity about each other.

Often no solutions are needed when couples fully hear and understand each other. When couples feel good about each other often problems melt away. Knowing each other's thoughts and feelings on an issue, allows to shift into problem solving if needed.