

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

*For a happier you and a happier
relationship*



How to develop positive communication skills...

...to knock your socks off

Why would you want to communicate better?

Communication is often hailed as the foundation of every good relationship. When you meet a challenge in your relationship, as of course you will ;-) - good communication is critical to resolving it quickly.

First and foremost, it's important to develop great *listening* skills before learning how to respond.

Ineffective listening can completely spoil what you're trying to achieve in terms of building a positive, rewarding, cooperative and loving relationship, particularly if you happen to be in the middle of a crisis.

In this e-guide, I'll let you in on the secrets of effective communication with advanced listening skills, so that you can bring any pointless arguments back to more fruitful conversations. You'll also minimise the stress-points in your relationship, improve your decision making skills and most importantly... you'll develop a better understanding of your partner.

The magic of being a great listener

Positive intent and focused attention will help both you and your partner feel that the two of you will ultimately be able to work it all out - regardless of what's happened!

Firstly, simply by listening well to what they want to tell you, you'll be building trust, and you communicate - directly and indirectly - reassurance that any problems can be overcome.

Whether your partner is telling you how their day was, or admitting to some misdemeanour, listening well is a key first step towards having an effective two-way conversation.

Secondly, your positive attention and open mind help you both to open up and reveal deeper feelings and concerns (some more than others!). It will also prevent you from inadvertently adding fuel to any fire by reacting in ways that are counterproductive.

I hope that you now understand the importance of good communication skills. And just in case you wonder if you're cut out for the fineries of communicating, well, don't worry - you are born with the innate resources to be just great at it!

So let's start by getting to grips with what 'advanced listening' really is...

How to become an advanced listener

Thousands of people visit my website everyday searching for the magic formula that will turn their partner into the perfect human being and make their problems disappear.

But really, the only magic formula to solving - and at times even preventing - relationship problems is the combination of...

- ... attentive listening
- ... an open mind
- ... refraining from using communication spoilers and
- ... the ability to respond effectively, with empathy and compassion.

We're all travelling our own road of self-development, and we all get it wrong many times. So, even though I'm guilty of making mistakes just like everyone else, I'm going to help you as best as I can, based on my 24 years' experience as a (couple) counsellor, but also my personal journey too.

Active listening means using a set of specific communication skills that help you to have the best conversation possible. It means you completely focus on the other person.

You want to hear, see, feel - and therefore understand - as much as possible of what the other person is trying to say. You can achieve this not only by listening well, but also by responding with the same kind of positive intention.

Remember that you don't have control over how he or she is going to react and respond to you, however hard you try. You only have control over how you deal with whatever is going on for you and how you behave. Believe me - that can make the difference between success and 'failure' and anything in between!

As a listener, your non-verbal communication is as important as your spoken words. Even without uttering a sound your body 'leaks' information. So, the

manner in which you listen also has an impact on what the other person is willing to share.

Ineffective listening is very likely to inflame and lengthen any conflict.

What if you have 'messed up' communication in the past?

It's very likely that you've made mistakes - haven't we all! If you've let the side down with shouts, manipulation, put-downs and stone-walling then it's going to take some determination and persistence with your new-found skills. It will probably take a little while before your partner 'gets' that you're striving to improve your own communication skills, and for him or her to remain calm and communicate well. But, you can only take responsibility for yourself.

In this case - start the conversation with something like:

"I know I've handled this very poorly on previous occasions, but I'll do all I can to do better this time. Let's get to the bottom of this together - I really want to hear what's going on for you"

Of course, when you've set that expectation, you need to work extra hard to fulfil it... otherwise you're back to square one and you won't get any answers.

Here is the best way to create and maintain an effective conversation...

5 Tips for timing a tricky conversation

If you want to discuss something important with your partner (or anyone else), make sure that you:

1. Time it right. Normally you wouldn't want to start a difficult conversation just when your partner is heading out of the door on their way to work, to an exam, to collect the children, to attend a wedding, etc. However, in some circumstances, you may feel you've got the right to ask for time to talk, even if their favourite TV programme is just about to start. But be sensible and use your instinct to time it right – you don't want to jeopardise the success of an important conversation (see suggestions a little further down)
2. Deal with potential interruptions in advance. If you have children make sure they're sound asleep or staying elsewhere. Children have a canny way of being able to interrupt arguments when they're feeling upset by them.
3. Avoid distractions from mobile devices or monitors. Switch off the doorbell, all phones and screens.
4. Decide that everything you are going to hear and observe is feedback and that you will not argue about it. See your aim as purely to gather information.

5. Set a time for a follow-up the next day - you're unlikely to make all the progress you want in one sitting.

In addition...

You're more likely to be able to achieve a positive outcome if you...

- ... tell your partner in advance that you want to talk about something important
- ... let them know you will really need all of their attention
- ... ask them when would be a good time to have the conversation

By preparing your partner in this way you will have already communicated that this isn't just an ordinary run-of-the-mill conversation. You'll have also communicated that you respect that he or she has needs too and that you have considered those.

Rather than firing all kinds of questions with a critical undertone and demanding answers, you're likely to get much more interaction and information by listening and encouraging expansion of answers. Here's how you can achieve that...

10 Ways to fine-tune your listening skills

When you're ready to have that important or difficult conversation, here's the pro-stuff that will help you set it up in the best possible way:

1. Avoid communication spoilers

Check with yourself if you normally resort to communication spoilers - anything that shows a lack of respect, and that communicates the idea: "I'm better than you" or "I know better than you".

Resolve to refrain from using them in the future. At the very least you'll probably like yourself more and you'll build better relationships all around. Right now you'll get better results in the all-important conversations over the next days and weeks. Also, understand that if this is something that you've habitually done in the past, it may not be the easiest thing to stop 'cold turkey'. The key thing to remember is that it's completely human to make mistakes - and if you do, it's vital that you stop and apologise.

2. Your position

Face your partner from a slight angle if possible. Match your body position a little - the angle of your spine, arms and legs (just watch people and observe how they do this naturally if they're in the middle of a pleasant conversation).

3. Avoid fidgeting

It's distracting - so, settle yourself in a comfortable, familiar position. Alternatively, go for a walk together, which many people find makes it easier for them to talk.

4. Eye contact

Make eye contact without staring, and break every now and then. Naturally move your eyes to your partner, looking them in the eyes whilst you're listening, and gently move your eyes away every now and then. Be reassured - you most likely do this naturally already.

5. Talking

Match your tone of voice and pitch subtly to that of your partner. Match your speed of talking just a little. Both of these points help to create a sense that it's safe to talk. This is advanced stuff, so don't overdo it!

6. Your attitude

Be open and inviting, relaxed (believe me - I know this is a major demand under the circumstances!) and again - trust in a positive outcome of some kind - and not necessarily from a single conversation.

7. Suspend any judgements

Remember everything you see, hear or feel is feedback (provided you are safe of course! See my article: Signs of an Abusive Relationship, <http://www.professional-counselling.com/signs-of-an-abusive-relationship.html>.)

However much you might be tempted to give them 'a piece of your mind' - refrain from spitting your feelings out in that way. Listen and

gently encourage your partner to expand on any points that niggle you for any reason. Remember, you want to get to the bottom of things.

8. Let go of preconceived ideas

If you only listen for the story you expect to hear, you're likely to miss major clues that point in a different direction. You're likely to ask the wrong questions (more on the right way to ask questions later).

9. Be aware of your own natural style

Blend anything you learn now with your own natural style of communicating - you're already as unique as the stars; why be different than you are?

10. Allow for silences

Most of all - stay quiet and bite your tongue. Allow space for contemplation. In other words, don't immediately fill in silences. Observe to discover what's going on for the other person; he or she may be trying to formulate an answer.

It's no mean feat sticking to all that, I know. However, all of these points help to build rapport. Building rapport is a skill most people are born with - to a degree. It's part of our genetic heritage and it means really connecting with someone.

Just by building rapport and listening, you'll be taking the wind out of their sails (if needs be) or helping to (re)build channels of communication between you and your partner!

Remember too that you can spoil every attempt at communicating effectively if you resort to communication spoilers such as judging and making critical comments, jumping to conclusions and making assumptions

These conversation killers will prevent you from getting any potentially trustworthy answers. Instead you're likely to end up with an argument. Not what you wanted at all!

So, now you've learned to listen, but what do you do when you're still having trouble truly understanding your partner?

Perhaps you've even tried to ask the same questions over and over again and you still don't have the answers you're looking for.

What if you still don't understand?

Firstly you need to trust that as human beings we have an innate ability to be 'empathic'. That means we're able to feel to some extent what another person is feeling. Special nerve cells in our brain called mirror neurons (you can perhaps guess why) 'fire' when, for example, we see someone stub their toe. These cells help us in a way to walk that mile in someone else's shoes and experience their feelings and emotions. Once you have calmed yourself (if necessary) and taken the time to reflect quietly over the conversation, however painful and difficult it might be, you'll find that you know more than you might have thought initially.

Secondly, you'll want to ensure that you don't turn the conversation into an interrogation. You can't keep asking the same questions without your attempts turning into an argument. You may need to ask yourself what the purpose is of

your questions. Do they serve your partner, the relationship or are you asking just to satisfy yourself?

Thirdly, don't expect to achieve all you want with just one conversation. Allow this initial conversation to develop over the next days, weeks and even months if needs be.

That is a really helpful thing to do, because the better you understand where your partner is coming from the more likely it is that you can begin to discover workable solutions to any problems.

In fact, I recommend you set time limits on difficult conversations. Particularly for someone who finds it difficult to talk at the best of times, knowing that you're going to talk about difficult stuff for only 20 - 30 minutes is much more manageable.

Now follows a step-by-step approach to help really develop effective communication with advanced listening, understanding and responding skills. Take your communication skills step-by-step to the next level

Step 1

Reflect back what you understand your partner said

First, feed-back in your own words the parts you do understand, then gently ask your partner to help you with the bits you don't. Like so, for example...

"I see that you think / feel / like / dislike ... and that you would like us / me to ... Can I just check that I've understood ... correctly?"

Ask for further clarification:

"Can you say a little more about that?"

"I'd really like to know a little more about..., so that I try and understand it better from your perspective."

In the meantime, try to identify the underlying feelings, then feed-back what you've picked up:

"I can see that it has really hurt you"

"You look sad when you explain that"

"I can read from your face/hear how angry you are about that"

"Yes I can see that you feel strongly about that" (when you can't identify the actual feeling)

Don't jump to conclusions. Particularly if you feel yourself reacting strongly, you will need to check out that you've got it right. You want to be able to respond - not react!

Stay calm! Emotional outbursts are likely to either shut the conversation down or lead to an argument. However, you can say something like:

"I feel really hurt when you say that"

"I can't accept such comments - I have to take a break" (I am assuming that you are not actually in danger)

"I'm really happy for you that... - carry on and tell me more"

Breathe slowly and calmly if you feel yourself becoming emotional. Use nice long out-breaths. Keep the focus on your partner until it's your turn.

Accept that you may never understand it all - but this need not stop you listening.

Staying with a difficult conversation can be really hard, particularly if your relationship is in real trouble. The manner in which you communicate can either calm down or inflame a situation.

Step 2

Allow your partner space and time

There are even more things you can do to address any problems and get the answers you're looking for:

Carry on proving that you're following what your partner's saying. Every now and then, repeat in your own words what you think you've just heard. This 'paraphrasing' helps to ensure that you are beginning to 'get the picture' and remember the details.

Gently and encouragingly say things like: "uh-uh", "go on", "of course", and so on.

Use non-verbal signs when appropriate, such as: nodding, shaking your head, looking puzzled or smiling. But do leave space for silences: your partner may be collecting their thoughts.

Remember that your partner (and you of course) will always be trying to meet his or her essential emotional needs, consciously or unconsciously. Meeting these needs is at the bottom of all our behaviour.

When your partner has finally got it all out, summarise your understanding of what's going on for him or her, including any feelings you have picked up.

But what if you still don't understand?

Here's what to do and say when you need further information and clarification.

Step 3

What to say when you don't understand

It's a given that you are not always going to understand your partner. You are two very different people, from different backgrounds. You have - or have had - your own dreams, experiences and traumas and all of these have left their marks in the way that they shaped the connections of the nerve cells in your brain.

Here's my advice for when you don't know what to say next. Go ahead and adapt the following to what you would really like to say:

"I see now that you... (fill in what you have heard). It's certainly different from how I see it. I hope that we can meet in the middle. Please now give me time to explain how it is for me."

"I'm really having trouble understanding that, but what I can see is ..."

"My memory of that is very different, but I know that our brains can play tricks on us and that each of our experiences of reality is unique - even if we were in the same spot! Let me explain now what's going on for me"

"I accept that you see that differently than I do - we'll have to agree to disagree, because..."

Summary

You've now learned advanced listening, understanding and responding skills.

You've learned to...

- give each other a most rewarding opportunity to be really 'heard'
- listen out for the 'unsaid'
- steer an argument back to a more fruitful conversation
- ask the right questions with the right attitude
- get to the bottom of things, as much as can be expected

By now practising and mastering these skills over time you'll have a far more positive experience whenever the two of you get together simply to enjoy each other's company or discuss a problem.

It's no wonder we often don't understand each other as we're each genetically, biologically and psychologically very different.