Communication Tips For Couples

1. Listen to your partner

During an argument, it can be easy to take the familiar position of trying to convince your partner why you are right, and they are wrong. This may also include interrupting, talking over your partner, or forming your rebuttal while your partner is talking. A simple, but important, principle is to **actually listen** to what your partner is saying. You don't have to agree with their point of view, but it is important to try to understand it. Ask for clarification if you don't understand. You have a better chance of resolving an issue if you focus your energy on helping each other feel heard.

2. Focus on the current problem

It can be easy to bring up unresolved (or even resolved) issues from the past during an argument to prove your point. This often leads to conversations getting off track and quickly becomes a game of listing off everything your partner has ever done wrong. To communicate effectively in an argument, **focus on the current problem and your thoughts and feelings in the present moment**. If this is a reoccurring issue, use a recent example. Other strategies to stay focused on the current problem are: avoid using "always" and "never" language (i.e. *You never listen to me*), don't tell your partner what they think or feel (i.e. *You don't care about me*), and avoid lecturing on what your partner "should" have done (i.e. *You should have known I going out last night would make me upset*).

3. Avoid the Four Horsemen

Dr. John Gottman (1999) describes four communication styles that can be detrimental to a relationship. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are as follows:

- Criticism: describing a problem as a flaw in your partner's personality (You are so selfish)
- **Defensiveness**: defending in order to protect yourself from a perceived attack (*I wouldn't be late if you would be ready on time*)
- **Contempt:** a critical comment made to feel superior to your partner (name calling, sarcasm)
- **Stonewalling:** withdrawing from the conversation and remaining silent

If you begin to notice that you are using any of these problematic styles with your partner, take responsibility for your actions. In addition, be aware of your nonverbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice, eye contact, and body posture).

4. Practice assertiveness by using I-statements

We often use "you-statements" in arguments which can leave the person on the receiving end feeling attacked and defensive (i.e. *You always go out with your friends; You never listen to me; You keep shutting down; You don't help out around the house*). I-statements can help you communicate your concerns and feelings without blaming your partner. Take responsibility for your feelings and share with your partner **how** a specific situation affects you rather than just listing off what you think they did wrong. Try the following to help clarify your experience:

I feel _____ when _____ [feeling] [describe the situation]

5. Communicate your needs

After identifying an issue and sharing your feelings with your partner, it can be helpful to communicate what you need from them. Be specific and clear about what you would appreciate from your partner. This can be a helpful first step in working towards compromise and finding a solution together.

6. Know when to take a break

When an argument is getting heated and you begin to feel that you may not be able to control your emotions or are feeling overwhelmed, it is a good time to tell your partner you need to take a break. Taking a break in this situation can be a useful strategy to calm down so you are able to reflect on **what** you are feeling and **why** you are feeling that way before returning to the conversation. Clarify how long of a break you need and make sure to use this time to regulate yourself rather than to ruminate on the argument. Helpful strategies to use during this time can be deep breathing exercises, going for a walk, listening to music, guided muscle relaxation, or doing something physical. Once you have a clearer idea of why and what you were feeling, return to the conversation and try to talk things through with your partner. Take responsibility for your feelings and actions and share this with your partner.

7. Keep a lookout for unhealthy patterns

According to Dr. Sue Johnson (2008), when we don't feel safe and connected to our partner, we can get stuck in three different patterns which she calls "The Demon Dialogues":

Find the Bad Guy: includes mutual blame, accusation, or attack and can also be referred to as "It's not me, it's you". Couples stuck in this pattern spend an incredible amount of energy pointing fingers over who is to blame, bringing up issues from the past to prove their point, and arguing over whether or not the details are "true".

The Protest Polka: where one partner actively tries to get a response from the other, and the other withdraws. In this pattern, partners are driven to feel connected and reassured and when that doesn't happen, the pattern spirals out of control and can lead to the Four Horsemen mentioned earlier.

Freeze and Flee can develop over time and serves as a way for us to protect ourselves in times when we don't feel safe or responded to. Couples stuck in this pattern are often distanced and detached from each other and instead of arguing, there is silence.

Dr. Johnson recommends that couples try to stay in the present moment and focus on what is happening between the two of you, right now. Recognize that you both are part of this "dance" and work on shifting your thinking to see these patterns as the enemy, not your partner.

References

Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown Publishers. Johnson, S. M. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.