

Relationships and communication

Communication is important in relationships as it allows us to share interests, aspirations and concerns, to support each other, to organise our lives and make decisions, and to work together in caring for children. Effective communication is about the way we talk and listen, and about our body language. We can all learn how to improve the way we communicate.

Communicating clearly

Talk to each other. No matter how well you know and love each other, you cannot read your partner's mind. We need to communicate clearly so that we can avoid misunderstandings that may cause hurt, anger or confusion.

When you talk to your partner, try to:

- Think about what you want to say and what you are feeling when you say it.
- Be clear about what you want to communicate.
- Be clear about your message so that your partner hears it accurately and understands what you mean.
- Talk about what you want and feel. Use 'I' statements such as 'I need', 'I want' and 'I feel'.
- Share positive feelings with your partner, such as what you appreciate and admire about them, and how important they are to you.

Non-verbal communication

When we communicate, we can say a lot without speaking. Our body posture, tone of voice and the expressions on our face all convey a message. If our feelings don't fit with our words, it is often the non-verbal communication that gets heard and believed. Notice if your body language reflects what you are saying.

Listening to communicate

Listening is a critical part of effective communication. A good listener can encourage their partner to talk openly and honestly. Tips for good listening include:

- Keep comfortable eye contact.
- Lean towards your partner and makes gestures to indicate interest and concern.
- Have a fairly relaxed posture with your arms and legs uncrossed.
- Face your partner – don't sit or stand sideways.
- Sit or stand on the same level to avoid looking up to or down on your partner.
- Avoid distracting gestures such as fidgeting with a pen, glancing at papers, or tapping your feet or fingers.
- Be aware that physical barriers, noise or interruptions will make good communication difficult.
- Show genuine attention and interest.
- Ask for feedback from your partner on your listening.

Improving communication

Open and clear communication can be learned. To improve the way you communicate, start by asking the following questions.

- What things cause conflict between you and your partner? Are they because you are not listening to each other?
- What things bring you happiness and feelings of connection?
- What things cause you disappointment and pain?
- What things don't you talk about and what stops you talking about them?
- How would you like your communication with your partner to be different?

If possible, ask these questions with your partner and share your responses. Consider and try ways to communicate differently. See whether the results improve your communication. When you are more aware of how you communicate, you will be able to have more control over what happens between you. While it may not be easy at first, opening up new areas of communication can lead to a more fulfilling relationship.

Some things are difficult to communicate

Most of us find some experiences or topics difficult to talk about. It may be something that is painful or makes us feel uncomfortable. For example, some people find it difficult to express their emotions. It is often the things that cannot be talked about that hurt the most.

Seeking help for communication issues

If you can't seem to improve the communication in your relationship, consider talking with a relationship counsellor. Counsellors are trained to recognise the patterns in a couple's communication that are causing problems and to help change those patterns. You could also consider doing a course that is relevant to your relationship. It is better to act early and talk to someone about your concerns, rather than wait until things get worse.

Where to get help

- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) National Register (Family and Relationship Therapy) Tel. (03) 9486 3077
- Relationships Australia Tel. 1300 364 277
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321
- The Australian Association of Relationship Counsellors Tel. 1800 806 054

Things to remember

- Communication is important in relationships. We need to talk openly and be good listeners.
- Share positive feelings about your partner with them.
- Most people can learn how to communicate more effectively.
- It is better to act early if you are having difficulties, rather than waiting for the situation to get worse.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Relationships Australia Victoria

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