

Communication Skills-Building

Problems in communication are regularly named as the key reasons for conflict within close relationships and between people in general. Family, work and personal lives are beset by communication problems creating the stress and misunderstandings that lead to breakdowns in relationships.

Other key reasons for conflict in longer-term relationships are:

- *Personality changes over time*
- *Unmet needs for intimacy, affection, sharing, sexuality. Sometimes it seems that a relationship has run its course and is no longer meeting the expectations of one or other of those involved.*
- *Trauma or unexpected event (illness, job loss), which stretches the couple's coping mechanisms too far.*

There are differences in the intensity of the problems being felt, and in the problem-solving skills of couples. People with better capacities to resolve conflict are more effective in preventing the escalation of problems. It is also true that some couples seem to be more effective in making relationships work just as it is true that couples differ in organisation, planning, values and style.

When trying to improve a close relationship, the following ideas are suggested as helpful strategies:

1. Being clear on **what** you want to say. Clear communication occurs when the information you want to share is transmitted clearly to the listener. This will assist the timing, the content and the manner of the communication.
2. The person listening has to **really** listen. **Real listening** consists of wanting to understand what the speaker is saying, to take in the words and ideas so that the experience of the speaker is shared. **Pretend listening** occurs when the listener seems to be listening but instead is formulating an answer to what is being said. The **gist** of what is being said is grasped and the rest of what is being said is assumed. Pretend listening also occurs when the mind is occupied in doing something else, like watching television, flicking over the pages of a magazine, or checking Facebook, so the listening is distracted or unfocused.

3. Communication is enhanced when **feedback** is sought from the listener enabling misunderstandings to be clarified. You can be wrong if you assume you know what the other person means. Mind-reading is frequently attempted, seldom achieved; the only way you can be sure if another has understood what you have tried to tell them is to ask them to tell you what they think you have said. This can lead to a process of getting a very clear idea of exactly what you are saying.
4. When one shares their experience with another person, such communication needs to be valued or **validated** by the listener. The opposite response is to invalidate the communication by rejecting, ridiculing or distorting it. Comments like 'what rubbish', 'stop complaining', or 'you're just like your mother' invalidate the communication. Validation comes from acknowledging the value of talking together, agreeing to think about what was said. Such reflection is appreciated by the speaker especially if the listener asks for a follow-up discussion at another time. **It is vital to see communication as aimed at understanding not necessarily agreement.**
5. **Treat each other as someone special.** Important dates and times are remembered within relationships. Birthdays, anniversaries, difficult times at work or study are acknowledged by partners as a demonstration of their specialness and commitment to one another.
6. Awareness of the partner means trying to meet each other's needs. This is 'being in tune with each other', sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of the partner. This brings high-level communication skills like **editing** - holding back a response because it may inflame a situation, thus setting up a problem resolution process.
7. **Don't argue.** Rather use the sharing, listening, understanding skills mentioned above in 1-4.
8. **Start interesting conversations.** Couples are enriched by being able to enjoy each other's life experience. Keep in touch with daily events, develop interests you are able to share, cultivate a learning attitude about life.
9. **Go out and have fun!!** Every couple needs to share, to laugh together, and to share experiences. Relationships need present-moment experiences to keep them fresh and vital.
10. **Make plans for the future.** Such plans involve specific action-linked goals that focus the couple on doing things together as well having personal interests. Make the effort to try these ideas. Notice how often parallel efforts are made by a partner who also seeks change. This encourages future discussions, continuing efforts, even the smallest of gestures, to enrich their present time together.