

FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

PERFORMANCE BOOSTERS: BASIC TRAINING FOR COUPLES—COMMUNICATION

Have you ever asked yourself questions like these?*

- How can I improve communication with my husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend? He/she always feels under attack.
- Why does almost everything my partner says make me angry?
- Is it healthy to communicate less in order to avoid conflict?
- My wife thinks I don't listen well. She asks me to do something, so I do it, but then it wasn't what she wanted. Why? How can I understand what she wants?
- How can I be a better listener?
- What does a healthy relationship look like? What are the most important factors for having a healthy relationship?
- What is the difference between a healthy argument and an unhealthy one?



If you have, then you may find that the strategies below give your relationships a boost.

Strategy #1: Start gently

The nature of the first three minutes of a typical argument between newly married couples can be used to predict marital stability versus divorce six years later. Stable relationships display more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions during the first few minutes of a discussion. Therefore, when starting a discussion with your loved one, work on being “gentle” and starting “softly.”

Strategy #2: Express and explain

When there is something that you want to discuss with a loved one, the following guidelines may help you express your feelings more clearly and effectively.

The “Speaker” can follow these guidelines:

1. Use “I” statements when describing your thoughts and feelings. “I” statements help the Listener not feel like they are being attacked and helps them hear what you are saying.
2. Be specific—only discuss one main idea at a time.
3. Pick a good time and place for expressing.

Strategy #3: Listen and hear

The other half of a discussion involves listening to what the Speaker has to say so that you truly hear and understand his or her feelings.

The “Listener” can then follow these guidelines:

1. Summarize and restate what you heard.
2. Don't question what you heard; react to what your partner said, offer solutions, or interpret the meaning.
3. Assess tone of voice, facial expressions, and your posture to indicate that you are open and not defensive.
4. Put yourself in the expresser's shoes.

Once one specific issue has been expressed and listened to, then partners switch roles. Strategies #2 and #3 can



help you break communication down to the basics so each person can be heard. We often forget to listen and just react. Listening and speaking are

skills that require practice and can help each person in the relationship get their needs met making for a happier relationship.

Strategy #4: How to disagree

Conflict itself won't destroy a relationship if the conflict

is resolved. However, the following four characteristics of arguments are “lethal” to relationships and foretell marital dissatisfaction and divorce. They have been called the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

Criticism involves attacking someone’s personality or character—rather than a specific behavior—usually accompanied by blame.

Contempt includes words or thoughts that show a lack of respect for the person during an argument.

Stonewalling, or *Withdrawal*, involves removing yourself from an interaction in a way that suggests disapproval, distance, and smugness.

Defensiveness happens when you verbally attack your partner and respond with excuses, denial of responsibility, negative solutions, and negative mind reading.

Try to get rid of these from your interactions.

Strategy #5: Repair

When an argument happens, attempt a “repair” that defuses the conflict/stress of the discussion. One or both of you can defuse things by agreeing to disagree, bringing humor into the conversation, making gentle statements, having make-up sex, and a variety of other ways. Also, focusing on positive, loving interactions with your loved one after a fight can help undo the negative effects of it. Sometimes what works to repair one fight will not work in another.

Strategy #6: Listen—don’t react

We often respond directly to what our loved one is saying with our own reactions. Over time, this may create a defensiveness that gets in the way of hearing what the other person is saying. Experts suggest really listening to your partner (use strategy #2) rather than reacting emotionally. That way you can satisfy your partner’s needs rather than debate them. Hopefully your needs can be met in return.

Strategy #7: Rebound from arguments

It is important to rebound from an argument and interact with your partner in a good way afterwards. Couples who



display fewer negative emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, and contempt) in conversation after an argument are much more likely to be together (i.e., not divorced)

four years later. Indeed, lack of such resilience in conversation occurred in over 90% of couples who became divorced. This emphasizes the importance of clearing the air each time after a conflict or argument, and learning from past disagreements as much as possible.

*These questions are from participants in the Soldier 360 Performance Enhancement program.

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