

Working on Relationships

Ed Beckham, Ph.D. and Cecilia Beckham, L.C.S.W., B.C.D.

One of the most common difficulties which prompts persons to consult with a therapist is relationship stress. For most people, marriage or a relationship with a significant other forms the core of life. Our primary relationship tends to have more of an impact on our overall level of happiness than even our work and career. This handout is designed to give you some basic skills to understand your relationship and to assist you in working on problems you may be facing. It will focus on five types of strategies, which can be learned and practiced by any couple. There is nothing magical or mysterious about these, and they can generally be worked on with or without the aid of a therapist. The five are:

- Providing support for each other
- Improving levels of intimacy
- Creating positive communication
- Improving couple problem solving
- Reducing negative thinking

Strategy Number 1: Giving Partners the Support They Need

One way to build your relationship is to learn better ways of providing practical and emotional support for your partner. It is important that you are both able to give support and to be able to ask for it when it is needed. This has been found to be a key element in maintaining healthy relationships. Spouses who feel that they receive a high level of support tend to be more satisfied with their relationship. How can this support be provided? Here are some specific ways:

Support your partner emotionally. Make sure to tell your spouse from time to time that you love them and that they are important to you. If your spouse is upset, sad, or having some other strong feeling, be available to listen to them. Allow them to talk without immediately trying to give advice, unless it is asked for. Empathize with their feelings. That is, listen for the emotions that they are expressing, and reflect back to them what you hear them saying. Validate your partner's thoughts and feelings, if at all possible. That is, let them know that their concerns are understandable and that you can understand why they feel the way they do. Provide some physical closeness and affection to support them if that's what they seem to want, but don't simply try to make everything "alright" with a hug. Be sensitive to what your partner wants and needs from you.

Things to Do

Commit yourself to complimenting your partner for their positive behaviors. Try to mention to them at least two positive qualities they have that you appreciate, every day

for two weeks. You can tell them directly, or you can leave notes, cards, flowers, or a small gift with a special note or card attached. Pay attention to whether your partner's positive behaviors towards you also increase.

Make a list of 20-30 ways that your partner can make you feel loved, such as making your favorite dessert, giving you a back rub, and so on. Share your list with them, and get a list back from them. Pick two things off of the list every day to do for them.

Provide practical support. One of the most difficult areas in marriage is deciding how to divide up household and child rearing duties. This has typically been the domain of women. However, with more and more women working, the result has usually been that the woman now has multiple roles. For example, she tends to be a wife, a mother, a worker, and a housekeeper. She often works a full-time job and then still performs the bulk of the childcare and household tasks. Husbands can be supportive of their wives by taking a fair look at the amount of work they are doing and finding ways of alleviating the burden by participating in some of these.

Support their current projects, hobbies, and interests. If the husband wants to be out in his workshop making or fixing something, just taking him a sandwich and a drink can be very supportive. Giving him the time to pursue hobbies without interruption can also send a positive message. Similarly, if the wife wants to get away from the house and the kids for awhile, her husband can find ways of helping to make this possible. He may be able to watch the children for her or do something else which would make shopping or other activities easier. One spouse's hobby may be uninteresting to the partner, but it is very helpful to at least show polite interest and listen to them discuss the hobby if they want to do so.

Support their overall life goals. This is the most general type of support and the hardest to describe, but it is still very important. Many smaller projects may be part of a larger goal. Attending a class may be part of going back to school to get a degree, which in turn may be a step towards developing a new career. Or a spouse might want to add more meaning to her life by becoming more involved in the community and helping out at the school. Emotional and practical support towards these life goals makes it easier for your spouse to achieve them and says a lot about the love and affection that you have for them.

Watch out for unhelpful support behaviors. These include. . .

--criticizing or blaming your partner when they are upset or going through a hard time

--overreacting to the problem they are talking about and making it seem even bigger than it is

minimizing the problem they are talking about and/or making it seem unimportant to you (Even if it seems trivial to you, it isn't insignificant to your partner.)

acting disinterested (watching TV or reading the paper)

cutting off discussion abruptly

offering “off the cuff” advice and then being upset when your spouse doesn’t accept it, or trying to quickly solve a problem instead of listening and being understanding

What if your partner’s interests, goals, and personality traits are not the same as yours?

Can you accept your partner as different from yourself? Can you support them in their goals even if they diverge somewhat from your own? Or are you trying to make them be like you? It is not going to help your relationship if you only support your spouse when they are being exactly like you and doing the things you want them to do. Marriage and relationships are not about two clones marrying each other. People are different when they marry, and new differences will likely emerge as the relationship goes on. It is important to value differences as being part of the other’s uniqueness. Your spouse can complement what you bring to the relationship; this increases your power as a twosome. For example, if one spouse is more assertive and doesn’t mind confrontation, they can be the one to deal with situations that call for this behavior, such as complaining to a company about a defective product. The more laid back, accommodating spouse can take the lead in situations calling for a peacemaker. If one spouse is less emotional and more analytical, their powers of reasoning will be useful in solving problems at times. On the other hand, it might not be good to have two people who are both relatively unemotional and methodical because the relationship might become somewhat dull and uninteresting. Learn to value your partner’s different attributes for what they bring to the relationship. If your spouse has interests or goals with which you are uncomfortable, discuss that with them. Some issues may be non-negotiable. However, these need to be the rare exception. Try to realize that your spouse is a separate person from you and that through pursuing their own goals, they will be adding something new to the relationship and preventing it from stagnating.

Make Sacrifices For Your Partner

A strong relationship is built when people are willing to go out of their way for each other at times and to sacrifice something they want for what their partner needs or wants. Love is not just a feeling. It is an act of decision and commitment as much as it is an emotion. Sometimes, our loving actions are brought on by our overwhelming love for the other person. And other times, love is simply what we choose to do. How can we motivate ourselves to make sacrifices for our partner, even when we aren’t feeling particularly positive towards them?

First, our behavior is based on our commitment and promises we have made to them.

Secondly, it can be based on a remembrance of all the things which your partner has done for you in the past.

Third, it is helpful to keep in mind that such sacrifices will nourish loving feelings in both of you and will strengthen the relationship for the future.

What if your partner is not willing to make sacrifices as well? If the flow of giving in a relationship is only one way, then this issue has to be reexamined. There is nothing virtuous about

constantly making sacrifices to the point of being a martyr or a rescuer. As with all aspects of relationships, there has to be a balance.

Strategy Number 2: Developing Greater Intimacy

One of the best ways to prevent needless problems in relationships is to work on creating positive intimacy. Developing intimacy is a way of performing “preventive maintenance” for relationships. You don’t wait until a car engine grinds to a halt up from lack of oil before taking care of it. (Well, hopefully you don’t.) Ben Franklin’s saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure is relevant here. To develop a strong relationship, it is important to have a variety of types of intimacy.

When problems exist in a marriage, it is not simply because negative experiences have built up to the point of hurting the relationship. It is also often because the couple has neglected to make sure that there are pleasurable, fun times that are shared together. These mutually enjoyable experiences have slowly dropped out of the relationship. Or perhaps they were never there to begin with.

Enjoyment and pleasure are like the gas and the oil in a car. If one runs out of these, the engine will grind to a halt. Without positive relationship building experiences, partners keep the relationship going only out of duty, habit, or convenience. They might even stay in a relationship out of the anxiety of being alone. But these reasons do not create satisfying togetherness and closeness. This is not to say, however, that all intimacy is enjoyable and pleasurable. There are times when sad or even angry feelings need to be shared between partners. But if these are dealt with in a supportive way, even this can be a source of intimacy and bonding.

The issues of having too many negatives or not having enough positives in a relationship are closely tied together, but they are different. Couples can sometimes avoid arguments and disagreements and yet have little or no closeness. On the other hand, it is true that as negative interactions increase, partners will pull farther and farther apart, diminishing their intimacy. It might seem that once negative interactions are worked on in therapy or between the two partners, the positive behaviors would automatically come back. But hurtful statements and years of conflict can make people pull away from each other. People can also literally get out of the habit of spending pleasant time together. Intimacy and enjoyment of each other has to be nurtured, whether it is prior to the onset of problems, in the midst of difficulties, or after major marital problems have been resolved.

There are a variety of types of intimacy. They are not clearly distinct from each other, and at any one time, a couple might be experiencing several of them. Five types of intimacy here: sexual closeness, physical touch, togetherness, emotional communication, and spiritual intimacy.

Sexual Intimacy. The word “intimacy” automatically makes many people, especially men, think of sex. This is a very important type of intimacy, but it is only one form. Take away the emotional closeness and communication and many persons will eventually lose interest in sex.

Doing sex therapy is almost always about working on relationships as well as about teaching sexual techniques. A rule of thumb is that “sex is never just about sex.” That is, when there are problems with sexual intimacy in a relationship, there are usually other problems (either in the individual or the couple) which led to the sexual difficulty. But there is no doubt that a smooth sexual relationship will help persons feel positive towards each other and thus make them want to continue work on the relationship. A pleasurable sexual relationship is very bonding and helps couples to find ways to cooperate on the tough issues.

Learning to talk about sex is very important. A sexual relationship is a dance between two people. It involves give and take, and it involves learning about each other. Sexual communication is part of overall sexual intimacy. Learning to talk about parts of your bodies and what feels good to you can not only bring about greater sexual pleasure but also a type of closeness in itself.

Physical, non-sexual intimacy. Men tend to blur together sexual and physical intimacy while women tend to view them separately. When men are physically close to their wives--touching them, giving them a massage, and so on--they often become sexually aroused. This happens less with women. This difference between the sexes creates certain problems. Men may avoid such physical caressing if they are concerned that they will become sexually frustrated. Women will avoid it if they think that they are going to be pressured for sex or that it is simply a manipulation by the man in order to get sex. But non-sexual touch is an important and distinct type of closeness. Taking a walk and holding hands, or going to the movie and putting an arm around one's wife are good opportunities for physical intimacy. These and other similar activities increase the likelihood that physical intimacy will occur between partners. Each couple will be different in this regard. For some couples, sitting on the couch and watching TV may be a strong prompt for physical closeness, while for another couple it might be taking a drive in the car.

Togetherness. Time together can occur when eating meals, going to sleep, watching TV, going out, taking a trip, participating in a mutual hobby, playing games, and socializing together with other people outside the home. This might seem to be a fairly simple type of intimacy and easy to arrange. However, with the busy schedules which many families have today, this form of intimacy may fall by the wayside. Just spending time with each other becomes a problem because of conflicting work schedules, time spent nurturing children, activities outside of the home, etc. Moreover, when the emotional closeness in the relationship begins to break down, couples often begin to find ways of avoiding time with each other.

It is important to engage in joint pleasurable activities. When two persons share in a common enjoyable event, such as a vacation or a weekend trip, the positive feelings from the experience tend to generalize and to be associated with the other person in our minds. This leads to greater bonding. It is important for a couple to spend time together in a pleasurable activity or shared interest several times a week, even if it is just sitting on the porch and enjoying the evening air.

Emotional and intellectual intimacy. These are similar but also somewhat different. These both involve talking with your partner and sharing things important to you--thoughts and feelings

that you wouldn't communicate to just anyone. Emotional sharing focuses more on revealing the feelings you are having inside, whereas intellectual intimacy can involve ideas, dreams for the future, and plans. Designing a house together, planning a trip together, discussing political convictions, talking about family goals or plans for your children--all of these can bring about feelings of closeness. Solving problems together can bring about a type of bonding as well. Whenever a couple is able to successfully resolve everyday problems, it strengthens the relationship.

Spiritual intimacy. Some couples share a religious faith and participate in religious observances. Going to church or synagogue together and jointly participating can give couples another dimension of closeness and bonding. For couples who do not have religious beliefs, there are still opportunities to talking with each other about the deeper issues of life. These would include grappling with the meaning of our life, what it means to be successful or have a "good life," and what our legacy is to be after we are gone. We all reflect from time to time on choices we have made in the past. We go to funerals and wonder about the meaning of life and death. We look at the universe and wonder, "What is it all about?" These are religious and existential issues with which we all are confronted, whether we have a formal religious faith or not, and sharing our thoughts and feelings about these can be a bonding experience.

Things to Do

Write a love letter to your spouse describing all the things you admire and respect about him or her. (Emotional intimacy)

Write a love poem to your spouse. (Emotional intimacy)

Do something with your spouse that you did when you were dating. (Togetherness)

List what you would like to happen at the end of the day when you get home or when your spouse arrives at home. Prioritize the list. Have your partner make one, too. Discuss your list and you partner's list. (Togetherness and emotional intimacy).

Make a commitment to have a time each day when the two of you can connect with each other with no distractions. Set aside this time each day for a month. (Togetherness and Emotional intimacy)

Spend time giving each other massages, stroking each other, or taking a bubble bath together. (Physical intimacy)

Take a walk and hold hands, or go to the movie and hold hands (Physical intimacy)

Try giving a hug and a kiss when you leave in the morning and when you come home in the evening. (Physical intimacy)

Create a special time for sex. Don't just let it be the same old thing. Consider a different time of day and a different place. Consider having a romantic evening leading up to it. (Sexual intimacy)

Make a list of leisure ideas that you would enjoy engaging in as a couple. For example, your list might include going on a walk, taking a picnic, going to an amusement park, and so on. Set aside time at least once a week for playfulness in your relationship. (Togetherness)

Plan a get away together once a month such as a weekend at a bed and breakfast or a hiking or camping trip where you can relax and unwind together. (Togetherness)

Create a mission statement for your relationship. Each of you write down your ideas of what makes a deeply loving relationship. Exchange your lists and work together to arrive at a joint statement of why you are together and what you want your relationship to be. Then develop concrete ways to move your relationship in the direction of your vision. It is helpful to review your mission statement every two to three months to remind yourselves of what you want to achieve. (Emotional intimacy)

Attend religious services together. Or if you are not religious, discuss how you see the meaning of your lives. Discuss with each other your most deeply held values, that is, what matters most to you. (Spiritual intimacy)

Strategy Number 3: Improving Communication

When coming into therapy, couples often indicate that “improving communication” is one of the goals for which they are seeking help. Why is this? Can't partners just talk spontaneously? Do they really need to learn how to communicate?

It does not take long into a relationship before most couples would discover that communication is not as simple as it would seem. Very early in their life together, talking seems to come very naturally. However, as a relationship progresses, there can quickly be problems and misunderstandings in the messages partners give each other.

There are a variety of reasons why communication and problem solving break down. For one thing, males and females tend to be somewhat different in how they communicate and even whether they desire to talk. Perhaps a person's parents were very quiet, silent types who could shut each other out for days or even weeks. In some families, feelings are not expressed or discussed, and so children from these families do not learn how to do communicate well.

In addition, persons often bring bad habits in communication from their families of origin. Their parents may have had very poor communication skills. They may have come from a stormy family, where small disagreements quickly escalated into verbally abusive arguments. Because of experiences growing up, partners may find themselves overreacting to minor problems. Under

stress, they may resort to belittling and threatening. Or perhaps they are so used to being criticized, that when a spouse makes a simple observation, it is heard as a criticism and they become defensive.

Typically, individuals who come from dysfunctional families tend to either duplicate the negative behaviors of the family or origin or to swing to the opposite extreme. It is difficult for such persons to find the middle ground. As a result, a person from a stormy family may be very emotional--or just the opposite, attempting to maintain control over their emotions and speaking very little of what they are experiencing inside.

In addition to what we learned from our families, we may have learned certain ways of communicating and defending ourselves by trial and error when we were children. We may have learned to pout, deceive, manipulate others, and so on. We may have learned to give conflicting messages by saying one thing with words and another with body language. These are not necessary or useful as we become adults and enter into mature relationships, but we may instinctively use what we learned when we were young.

The strong emotions we sometimes feel in adult relationships (anger, depression, jealousy, frustration) sometimes lead us into very stormy communication. In our frustration with our partner, we may try "emotional blasts" or shocks as a way to try to jolt our partners into hearing us or changing their behavior. But usually, these techniques are very counterproductive, and usually, the more frustrated we become, the more negative our communications become as well.

If you are ready to start work on the communication in your relationship, it is helpful to start by reflecting on the fact that communication is complex and serves a variety of purposes. The following are a few of the ways in which language is used in marriage.

--We communicate to ask for and convey basic information ("Has the repairman for the garage door come yet?")

--We communicate to solve problems ("I need your help in getting our son to go to bed on time. What can we do about it?")

--Communication expresses feelings ("I'm feeling sad because it's the anniversary of my father's death.")

--In addition to simply talking about feelings, it is sometimes used to actually vent feelings and may be useful in blowing off tension ("I'm so mad at you right now I can't stand it!")

--We sometimes use communication to try to get our partner to feel certain ways, such as shame or guilt ("How could you make fun of me in front of those people? Don't you realize how that made me feel?"). We may also use it to make our partner feel good ("You look exceptionally beautiful tonight.")

--We use it to persuade our partner to do something ("You said we would go out on a date at least every other week. But it's been two months. You're not living up to your promise.")



Points to Ponder

Partners sometimes give each other mixed messages in which the overt (obvious) message and covert (hidden) message are different. Why do you think this is?

Getting Personal

Which of the following ways do you and your partner use communication?

Twelve Steps Towards Better Communication

It is not just what you want to say that is important. How it is said is equally significant. Here are twelve ways that you can improve the communication with your partner.

1. Set aside appropriate time to focus on communication

Turn off the TV, and put down your newspaper. Make eye contact with your partner. Let them know that you are really paying attention. Eye contact is a concrete way of letting your partner know that you really are listening. If you don't look at your partner, it may seem that you are disinterested. This in turn can lead to anger and resentment. Set aside time to dialog several times a week. Find an appropriate time and place which will be conducive to communication. If you have negative feedback to give your partner, do it in private. Don't make your spouse lose face in front of other people. In addition, if you have something negative to say, you may want to alert them ahead of time. They may want to wait until there is a better opportunity to discuss what you have to say. For example, you might say, "I have some problems that I want to talk over with you. Would now be a good time, or do we need to wait until later?"

2. When talking about a problem, let your spouse know what you want from them and what you want to see happen. Don't just tell them what you don't like.

It is easy to criticize your spouse's behavior. If this is not accompanied by positive suggestions then it can be a very destructive form of communication. In addition, some partners tend to point out problems and then shoot down their spouse's ideas of how to solve them. Problems are solved more quickly if you will take some responsibility for coming up with solutions, too. Many therapists recommend that couples use "I" statements, such as

"Here is the problem. . . , and I think one solution would be . . ."

By using "I" statements, you are taking responsibility for your feelings and wants. Rather than

simply putting your spouse on the spot to come up with a way to please you, you are providing some acceptable solutions. These statements usually take the form of something such as “I feel . . .,” “I want...,” or “I think . . .” They generally lead to better problem solving than statements starting with “you,” such as “you don’t . . .” or “you need to stop . . .” It may seem self-centered to make a lot of “I” statements. However, they generally keep us from pointing our finger at our partner and putting them on the defensive.

3. Practice the art of listening. Give your spouse a chance to talk.

In well functioning couples, communication often has a particular type of rhythm to it. One person talks without being interrupted. They stop. They let the other person talk. Sounds simple doesn’t it? And yet the simple things of life can be the hardest. Especially when a relationship is ailing.

Let there be some give and take in your talking. Allow your partner to talk; avoid interrupting and dominating him or her. Find a rhythm of conversation that allows both of you opportunities to express yourselves. Try not to be prepare a “rebuttal” in your head while they are talking. You can’t really listen and prepare a rebuttal at the same time. Give your partner some concrete indications that you are listening. Head nods and “Mm-hmm”s can be helpful because they indicate interest without interrupting the flow of the conversation or cutting the other person off.

Here are some communication rhythms which indicate that there is a problem.

No one talks. In this style, the problem is that there is too little communication. There are long periods of silence. Spouses are not sharing much, if anything, of what is on their minds.

Interrupting. Here the problem is just the opposite. The discussion (or arguing) is so fast and furious that one person cannot complete what they are saying without the other person butting in to counterattack. The interrupting means that each person is not listening. They are formulating their debate strategy. When a person is given a chance to finish what they are saying, they are more likely to feel as if they are being heard.

The monologue. In this situation, one spouse gets on his soapbox and expounds the “truth.” They understand the whole situation, and now that they have the other person’s attention, they are going to establish once and for all what the “right” way is to see it. If the other person is more passive or less dominant, they may have a hard time getting a word in. The silent person may tune out the monologue and give up hope of any meaningful communication. None of us have the truth all wrapped up. Even if we did, it still wouldn’t help the relationship to imply to our spouse that we know everything. Monologues just doesn’t work, no matter how smart we are.

Sometimes it is important to realize that a spouse may not want advice; they may just want to be heard. Sometimes when a spouse (often the wife) wants to tell their partner about a problem, the

other person may become upset about what is happening. The husband may want to help the wife fix her problems, and so he may begin to tell her a logical solution in order to fix them. However, she may feel like he is not being supportive because instead of “listening,” he is giving advice. Women often don’t want quick solutions to their problems. They generally feel capable of making their own decisions. What they often want from their husband is someone who will listen to them, understand how they feel, and help them process alternative solutions.

Listen for your partner’s feelings as well as the content of what they are saying. Try reflecting back to your partner what you think they are feeling, such as, “It seems like you’re scared that they are going to replace you--is that it?” Reflective listening is also helpful for couples who interrupt each other because it slows down the pace of the conversation.

As your spouse is talking, if you find that you are having difficulty understanding their position, ask them to tell you more about it by giving you examples or illustrations. Sometimes, people take the easy way out, acting as if they understand what the partner is saying, even if they don’t. By asking for specifics, you are more to grasp what the other person is saying.

4. Find opportunities to praise your partner.

Find ways of giving your partner “positive strokes.” Relationships are like plants--they need to be nurtured and watered. Don’t just focus on what your partner needs to change. Tell them also what they don’t need to change--what you already like about them. What have they been doing well? What has your partner said that was helpful or pleasing to you? Statements such as this not only make your partner feel good, but they also increase the chances of them giving positive compliments back to you. That would be nice, wouldn’t it? Find ways of introducing positive communication on a daily basis.

5. Watch out for vague generalizations.

There are basically two types of these. In the first type, couples use terms such as “always” and “never” which escalate arguments. In the second type, one partner labels the other with a word or phrase such as “lazy” or “a loser.”

Here’s an example of an overgeneralization. Can you see why it’s bad communication?

Husband: You’re never on time when we are going somewhere. You’re always late.

Wife: That’s not true. I was on time for church yesterday. And I was on time when we met at the restaurant. And you were the one late this morning to work.

This is a useless argument. It is pointless to argue about whether something is “always” true. The issue is that the husband was upset about a specific recent situation, and that is where the discussion needs to focus. Moreover, overgeneralizations also tend to bring up the past, since couples start to discuss whether something has always been true. Dealing with the past is likely to

sidetrack the couple from the present issue and to bring up hard feelings.

Couples who have been together a long time may know each other well. They may even be able to make certain generalizations which usually hold true. Nevertheless, it is still better to be specific about a problem. It doesn't create as much resentment in the other person and is more likely to lead to a resolution of the problem at hand.

Husband: "I am upset because the last three times we were supposed to meet, you were a half hour late--or more."

Why is this better? Because it is less likely to start a useless argument as to whether the wife is "always" late. In addition, it is not as condemning. Finally, as someone once said, "No generalization is worth a damn--including this one." How true!

Trait names are overgeneralizations because they imply that the other person is a particular way all the time and in all situations--which is unlikely to be true. Spouses sometimes call each other names, such as "selfish", "stupid", and so on. Usually, people are not selfish at all times and in all situations. Neither are they incompetent at all times and places. For that reason, using trait words is usually inaccurate. In addition, they tend to push "emotional buttons," making the other person angry or defensive and eager to counterattack. Another problem with these overgeneralizing labels is their vagueness. They often start arguments because it is not exactly clear what the speaker is talking about.

Still another problem with trait names is that they imply that the problem behavior cannot be fixed or changed. The implication is that the problem is not just in a single behavior-- the problem is in the core of the person. This in turn implies that they are not likely to be able to change. This is very counterproductive. If you want your partner to change, you want them to believe that they are capable of altering their behavior if they choose to do so. People are somewhat suggestible. Why would you want to suggest to your spouse that they cannot change? Wouldn't you instead want to plant the suggestion in their mind that they can be different?

If salespeople treated customers as we sometimes talk to spouses, our economy would grind to a halt. Can you imagine a car dealer trying to sell an automobile in the following way?

Ford Dealer to Customer: This is our finest Ford. But of course, I can tell now that you have a rotten, no good Chevy personality. You're just never going to change are you? Why are you wasting my time?

And yet that is exactly what we are doing when we call our spouse "selfish" or "stupid." We are not influencing our partner to change--just the opposite. We are telling them that they are incapable of change.

Here is an example of a husband using a trait label to describe his wife:

Husband: "The problem with you is that you are unorganized (meaning that she is late to appointments)."

Wife: (not understanding what he meant by this vague term): "The heck I am. I just went through all of the kitchen cabinets yesterday and cleaned them all and organized them. You ought to try to running a household with four kids and see how good you would be at it."

Clearly, this is a pointless argument. The overgeneralizing trait label has gotten them into a discussion that has nothing to do with her lateness to appointments.

Here is an example of a wife using a trait label against her husband:

Wife: "My mother always told me that you were lazy. Now I see that she was right" (meaning that the husband is putting off mowing the yard and taking out the trash until all of the playoff games are over--sometime next February).

Husband: "That's unfair. I work my butt off for this family. I put in ten and twelve hour days. And what thanks do I get? Nothing but criticism!"

Even if the couples eventually resolve the misunderstanding, an argument has been started. The "law of once started arguments" says that even if a misunderstanding is straightened out, once an argument has been started, it will tend to find a new object and keep going. Actually, there is no such law. We just made it up. But we find that it tends to be true, anyway.

6. Do the unexpected--agree with your partner. Don't let disagreements become predictable.

Even if you are arguing, look for one thing that you can agree on with your partner and surprise them. For example, you might say, "You know, I disagree with you about buying a new car, but I certainly agree with what you just said about buying a new refrigerator. You are absolutely right about that." This will not only surprise your partner, it will show that you really are trying to cooperate and to solve problems--not just trying to argue. (It's also fun to see the look of surprise on their face when you suddenly agree with something they have said.) If you can't find something with which to agree, then try to find something positive to say about your partner in the midst of an argument ("Even though I disagree with you, I can tell that you have given this a lot of thought.")

John Gottman in his book The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work talks about the importance of "repair attempts." These are efforts by a person to calm down an argument and get the discussion back on track to more productive communication. It is important that during a heated argument, at least one partner makes a repair attempt. It is also important that the other partner recognizes this as a positive move and is receptive to it. Here are some examples of repair attempts which Gottman offers:

“Please say that more gently.”
“Did I do something wrong?”
“That hurt my feelings.”
“I’m feeling sad.”
“I feel defensive. Can you rephrase that?”
“Please don’t lecture me.”
“I’m starting to feel flooded.”
“I need things to be calmer right now.”
“Can I have a kiss?”
“Can I take that back?”
“Please help me calm down.”
“Please be gentler with me.”
“I really blew that one.”
“How can I make things better?”
“Let’s find common ground.”
“I never thought of things that way.”
“One thing I admire about you is...”
“Please, let’s stop for awhile.”
“Let’s agree to disagree here.”
“We are getting off track.”
“I understand.”
“I love you.”

Using humor can lighten a situation. Of course, whether this is a constructive behavior or not will depend upon the particular couple and upon the gravity of the discussion. It is important to make sure that the other person does not feel that they are being made fun of. Nevertheless, some couples are able to use humor quite well to prevent serious arguments.

7. Pay attention to what your body language is saying. Make sure that you aren’t sending mixed messages.

It confuses a spouse when you say one thing and act another way (such as saying that you’re not upset but having a pouty look on your face). Of course, sometimes that is exactly what people are trying to do when they give discrepant messages. They are trying to confuse the other person.

Husband: I know that we planned to do something together today, but the guys want me to go play some golf. Would that be okay?

Wife: Well, we had talked about going to the mall together. And I was really looking forward to it. (Now she is giving him sad, puppy dog eyes.) But okay, if that’s what you want (sighs and rolls her eyes).

In this case, the husband is going to be confused by what the wife is saying and doing. It is not clear what message she is giving, and it is also not clear to which message the husband will respond. No

matter which one he does respond to, he may be doomed. If he doesn't go, she may ask him why, since she can say that she gave him permission to go. If he does play golf, he may return home to icy silence.

Why do we give discrepant messages? Perhaps for some of us, it is because we feel that we don't have permission to say what we really mean. For others of us, we feel that we are powerless anyway--it doesn't matter what we say. So we choose to give in, but we silently voice our displeasure. Finally, and most negative, we may give discrepant messages in order to unfairly get the upper hand in a disagreement. By communicating two different things we can later come back and claim to have given the "other" message--the one that they didn't act on:

"Well, I said you could go play golf. It's not my fault you stayed home."

Or

"I can't believe you went ahead and played golf when you could see how it made me feel and how disappointed I was."

8. Stay on the Subject--Don't Get Sidetracked

Almost every couple has had the experience of getting sidetracked from an original problem onto something else that may or may not be important. One issue can lead to another and another and another until finally, both persons have forgotten what they were initially talking about.

Husband: When are you ever going to clean the kitchen?

Wife: Well, your desk is always pretty messy, too, you know. You're not exactly Mr. Clean. Didn't I have to go wash your car and clean it out? And wasn't it you that was supposed to mow the yard?

Husband: I couldn't mow the yard because the mower was broken.

Wife: Yeah, it was broken because you didn't take care of it. You buy all these things, but you don't repair them. Sometimes you don't even use them.

Husband: I don't have time to do things like that because I'm so busy earning money for this family--the way you spend money.

Wife: I don't spend that much money. I just buy what the family needs.

What is the common thread here? The only commonality is defensiveness and trying to shift the subject onto the other person's shortcomings. It won't be long before this couple loses track of what the original disagreement was about. This will make it impossible to come to a solution. It will also be difficult for them to resolve anything because too many negative feelings have been stirred up about too many things. There is a cloud of confusion. The husband and wife may avoid each other the rest of the day, be extremely upset with each other, and yet not even be able to remember the original issue. The rule of thumb is to deal with one subject at a time. Other issues may seem related, but they can get couples off the track.

A similar problem occurs when couples try to deal with several problems all at once. This is similar to sidetracking, but it is not exactly the same. Bringing up several issues all at the same time can overwhelm the other person. They can't absorb all of the information, and they are likely to become defensive quickly. It makes it hard for any problem solving to occur. Here's an example of bringing up an overly complex problem:

“We really need to talk. I just can't take it how you don't let me know when you are coming home. You just do your own thing without having the courtesy of staying in contact. And another thing, when are you going to stay home and fix things around here? The house is falling down around my ears. Why don't you just stay home sometime? And maybe just read a book or play a game with me? Even when you are home, you just stay to yourself.”

What is the main issue here? Who knows? There are in fact several issues, and the spouse receiving the feedback is likely to respond in a manner that is just as confused as the original feedback.

9. Stay away from “guilting” your partner into submission

Winning isn't everything. Sometimes winning isn't even winning. You can “win” an argument through guilt, but it can cause a boomerang of resentment. As a result, more problems can come back to haunt you later on.

Partner 1: “My family traveled a thousand miles to see us, and you wouldn't even go out to eat with them. Now they probably won't ever come back. And you know how important my family is to me. It's your fault if I don't get to see them very much in the future.”

Be careful about implying that your partner is rotten, horrible, and insensitive. This may make them feel guilty and then angry. They are likely to want to say something angry back at you. Stay away from guilt-producing statements unless there is truly a moral issue involved. If the other person gives in out of guilt, they are likely to make only temporary changes, and the problem will probably return in one form or another. Persons who use guilting have to be ready to play the guilt card over and over and over because it produces only temporary results. This in turn causes other problems later on, such as deep seated resentment and passive aggressive behavior on the other person's part.

10. Avoid power moves and ultimatums

There are other types of power moves in addition to guilting. The threat of leaving is often used by dysfunctional couples as a club against the other person.

Spouse: If you do that, I'll leave and never come back...

Ultimatums may seem to resolve a problem, but again the result is usually only temporary. They tend to push people into a corner where they either have to lose face by giving in or have to act tough and tell their partner to go ahead and leave. Needless to say, feelings of resentment and/or intimidation eat away at the fabric of the relationship in such situations. After separation or divorce has been

threatened once, all future threats simply become clubs against the other person. They are relationship-damaging power moves which have no value whatsoever. There is only one time to give your spouse an ultimatum in a marriage, and that is when you mean it. If their drinking or abuse has reached an intolerable point for you or the children, then it is appropriate to threaten to leave. After all, wouldn't you want to be notified if your spouse was thinking of filing for divorce? Wouldn't it be appropriate to threaten leaving before actually packing your bags and walking out the door? But, after you have threatened divorce once in a marriage, either do it or don't do it. Any further threats are counterproductive.

Yelling is another power move. Men who have powerful voices may do this to frighten their wives into submission. On the other hand, some men may do it without realizing how it frightens their partner. Women can experience yelling in almost the same way as they would an act of physical violence. Verbal abuse is another type of power move which can manipulate the other spouse through of fear.

11. Avoid mind-reading

While people often know their spouses pretty well, it is dangerous to think that we can know what another person is thinking. When they say one thing, we may believe that they actually mean something else. Sometimes mind reading occurs when there is a quiet, non-talkative partner or spouse, since it is hard to know what they are thinking. We need communication, and if our partners don't share their inner thoughts and feelings, we are likely to try to imagine what they are thinking. Mind reading can lead to us to be overly upset about a situation and sometimes to be upset over nothing at all. It can lead us to tell our partners what they are "really" feeling or thinking, as if we know better than they. Contradicting our partner in this way is another "button pusher." If in doubt as to what your spouse is thinking, ask them. If they are giving discrepant messages, point that out, but don't pretend to know what they are thinking better than they do.

Wife: You set up that new bank account because you think I spend too much money. You're trying to make me cut back on what I spend.

Husband: Well, we do need to discuss spending, but that isn't why I set it up. I needed a bank where I could do my business more conveniently. Because I haven't been able to get to our money easily, some of our bills have become overdue.

Wife: Well, okay, but only last week you said that you were going to find some to encourage me to cut back on my spending.

In this example, an argument could have started because of the wife's mindreading of the husband's intentions. Her guesses were apparently untrue. But rather than starting an argument, the husband sets her straight about his real motives. She in turn shares why she believed what she did, which both indicates that she had some logical reason for her reaction and also points out to him that he had given her some evidence for her conclusions. But the whole exchange could have ended quite differently with considerable animosity if they hadn't taken time to explain themselves better.

Trying to read the other person's mind is mainly a problem when jump to incorrect conclusions. We can falsely attribute selfish or malicious motives to our partner. But even when we are right in our conclusions, it can make the other person to speak as if we know the truth, implying that they are lying to us. In the example above, there was no harm done. However, here is an example where an argument might get started and lead to a much more negative conclusion:

Wife: When I talk to you, you have that little smirk on your face. You must not care at all what I am thinking or feeling. You're just looking down your nose at me and blowing me off. I'm sick of it...

Husband: Well, I'm sick of you, too. Et cetera, et cetera.

In this case, the wife's mindreading is triggered by her husband's body language. However, it is not clear that he is aware of his smirk or that he means anything by it. Such a facial gesture can be an expression of contempt (this is how the wife is interpreting it), but it can also result from anxiety and defensiveness. It might even indicate an attempt to bring humor into the argument--to tone it down. Or it might mean hardly anything at all. In this case, the wife's mind-reading made her feel sure that he was poking fun at what she was saying. She felt this so strongly that she didn't check it out with her husband. It would have been much better if she had. Here's an example of how the discussion might have proceeded:

Wife: Sometimes, when I'm talking, you get this strange grin on your face. It looks like a smirk--like you feel that what I'm saying is stupid or unimportant. I wish you wouldn't do that.

Husband: I wasn't aware that I was doing it. I think it goes back to when my mother would lecture me, and I would feel cornered. I would get very anxious and get this look on my face.

This exchange does not necessarily solve the problem, but it goes a long way towards clearing it up. The wife has shared the same information with her husband in the second example as in the first, but she has done so in a way that could lead to productive results.

12. Don't push your partner into a corner--always leave them a way out

Never push a vicious animal into a corner. Not that your spouse is a vicious animal. (At least we hope not!) When trapped, animals and people become more aggressive. One important guideline is that people need to have a way out of an argument or confrontation if their feelings start to overwhelm them. Oftentimes, spouses don't want to let the other person withdraw. Sometimes this is for a good reason, such as a tendency by the other spouse to avoid communication and problem solving by pulling away. On the other hand, it is also important to understand not to not push your spouse beyond the level of emotions that they can handle. They need to be able to pull back both emotionally and think things over. They can do this by stopping the discussion or even by leaving the room or the house.

If one person can't handle the emotions they are experiencing and feels they are going to "blow up," it is better for them to leave temporarily. It is also generally best that an argument or conflict not go on beyond twenty or thirty minutes. After that, the chances are that the conflict will only worsen. The problem can still be discussed further, either later in the evening or maybe the next day. So there is a time to leave, and there is a time to sit back down together to discuss problems. By giving your partner permission to leave if they need to, many destructive interactions can be prevented. The problem here is that some spouses may use this to avoid dealing with problems altogether. It is essential that if one person leaves, they let the other partner know that they will discuss it later, perhaps even stating a time for this to happen.

Another reason a spouse might be reluctant to let the other partner leave is the fear of being abandoned. When one person "stomps out" and says something vague, such as "Well, I'm leaving," it may sound as if they are leaving for good. In some cases, the person leaving may be intentionally aggravating a fear of abandonment in order to put themselves in a one up position. They may say something like, "I'm not putting up with this; I'm out of here." The fear of abandonment can cause the person being left behind to plead, try to bar the door, or physically restrain them (all of which usually end in disaster). For this reason, dramatic exits are usually "game playing" and destructive. Exits need to be undramatic and even quiet. Their purpose is to calm the interaction, not to aggravate it.

Husband: (Said in a quiet tone of voice): Things are getting out of hand, and I'm getting overwhelmed. I'm going to take a walk for a few minutes. I'll be back later. We can talk more tonight. Or maybe it might be better for us to talk about it tomorrow.

This type of exit does not produce as much fear of abandonment and is not as likely to provoke a physical confrontation.

The game playing aspect of dramatic exits results from the combination of an overt (visible) message and a covert (hidden) message. The covert message is, "I may leave you; you had better watch out." If the person is confronted about this later, they may maintain that they only said they were leaving the house and that their partner made too much out of their statement. But in reality, they may have intentionally been giving two different messages.

Learning to Argue Within the Limits

When having problem solving sessions, heated discussions, or arguments, it is important to make constructive rather than destructive statements. There two ways communication can be used. It generally can be used for one or the other but not both at the same time. It can be aimed at working on problems, or it can be used to hurt our partner's feelings. If it is aimed at demeaning our spouse in some way then it is likely that nothing useful will come out of the interchange. It is also likely that the discussion will deteriorate into an exchange of barbs and name calling. Each person needs to make a conscious decision as to what they are trying to say and to accomplish. Without such a decision, each partner can be drawn into making biting, hurtful statements which will be long remembered by the other person.

Can There Be Value in Conflict?

Problem solving generally works best in a calm, unemotional environment. Can you imagine trying to fix a flat tire and being angry at the same time? It wastes energy and may cause you to take longer to fix the flat.

But it is also a mistake to always try to avoid anger and conflict. Total avoidance of anger can have negative effects on a marriage, just as “letting it all hang out” can also hurt it. The expression of anger in itself is actually neither positive nor negative. It is the way that anger is expressed which is important in determining whether it helps or hurts a relationship. Our feelings of anger may be obvious when we confront our partner with something that is bothering us. That doesn’t mean that we are tearing the other person down or trying to hurt them. Consider the following examples:

“I’m upset that we’re not communicating more. You have told me that you are interested in what I have to say, but as soon as I ask you to talk with me, you find something else that has to be done right away.”

“I’m wondering when the garage is going to be cleaned up. You have said that you were going to clean it, but each weekend something more important comes up. I’m tired of looking at all of the things out there.”

“I need more time with you. You tell me that you don’t have time to go on a weekend trip with me, but whenever your mother calls you to come over and help, suddenly you have time.”

Each of these statements confront a problems issue. The persons making these statements might feel and look angry. But there is nothing demeaning or inherently hurtful in what is being said.

Advanced Communication 101: Talk about Your Talking

This may be the most important and yet undervalued part of a relationship. It is the ability of the two partners to discuss how they talk about problems and to improve their style of communication. For example, a partner who is able to do this well might say:

“The other day when you became so angry with me, I think you misunderstood what I was saying. I think what you were reacting to was something different from what I meant. What I was trying to say was...”

Or

“I’ve noticed that when the TV is on, we don’t seem to talk like we used to. Would it be okay if I turned off the TV during supper to see if that would get us back to communicating as we did in the past?”

Or

“When we’re discussing a problem, I’ve noticed that you start frowning. I feel like you are disapproving of what I am saying. Then I want to shut up and not talk anymore.”

Talking about our talking is not just communication--it’s meta-communication. It allows us to change the way we talk to each other so that it can be more informative, more practical, more caring, or whatever we want it to be. When we are not able to talk about how we communicate then it is very easy to get stuck in negative patterns of interaction. This may lead us to feel hopeless about fixing our problems, and we may give up.

Advanced Communication 102: Learn to Share the Feelings Behind Your Feelings

Too often, couples don’t share the entire range of their feelings with each other. The anxiety or hurt which produce anger may be hidden, while the anger comes out more easily. Persons often feel excessively vulnerable if they show their tender, hurt feelings. However, oftentimes our partner can listen to these and understand them better than they can hear and understand our anger. Moreover, behind our anger can be considerable emotional pain. The hurt may be the original and stronger feeling. Anger is often an emotion which arises after we feel threatened or wounded. When there is anxiety or some other unpleasant feeling behind the anger, try sharing the other feeling first. Here is an example:

“I know that I have been very irritable with you lately. The fact is that I am anxious about what is going on at work. In addition, I’ve been worried about whether our relationship is going to last and whether you are going to leave me. In reality, I’m not as angry at you as I am worried about what is going on.”

This kind of expression of deeper feelings can open up a dialog between you and your partner on a whole new level.

Advanced Communication 103: Learning to ask questions and draw your partner out.

Sometimes it is difficult for our partners to say what is on their minds. Helping them to say what they want to say is difficult for us--especially if it is something that we don’t want to hear. One of the most challenging aspects of marital communication is actually helping our partner to articulate something they feel and think when we would rather be arguing our side of the case. Our natural tendency is to be glad that they cannot clearly state their position, because then we can more easily overpower them with our logic. But the most loving thing we can do for our partners is to first help them say what they really want to say. By actually assisting them in developing their thoughts, we do several things:

- let them know we are listening
- let them know we care
- move the problem toward resolution by clarifying the issues and making our partner feel involved in the process
- lessen the likelihood of stonewalling and stalemates



Points to Ponder

What would relationships be like if people could not communicate?

Working on Problems in Your Relationship

When Your Partner's Behavior Seems to Be the Problem

You may have skipped directly to this section. After all, it may seem much more appealing to work on your spouse's problems than to read the section on "Making Sacrifices for Your Partner." Focusing on changing the other person is often the wrong focus. Moreover, it is sometimes futile to aim at trying to change someone else. It is your own behavior that you have the most control over, and it sometimes your actions which are provoking counterattacks from your partner.

But when it seems essential to you that your partner change, there are ways of trying to accomplish this. One method is to carefully observe their actions, then reinforce them when they are acting more positively. In other words, wait for them to make a positive change, even if it's a small one and then reinforce them. Reinforcement increases the likelihood that they will come back at a later time and repeat the positive behavior. It accomplishes this by following their pleasing behaviors with something which is pleasant and rewarding, such as expressing appreciation or doing something nice for them. If the husband is working on something which the wife has been asking him to fix for awhile, she might bring him a sandwich and a soft drink while he is repairing it.

This method does not wait until a full and total change has been made before reinforcing the other person. Let's say that the husband has been complaining to his wife that she isn't keeping the house as neat as he wants it. One day he comes home and the kitchen is clean and straight, but the living room is still messy. If he comments to her on how disastrous the living room looks, then the wife will feel that her new attempts to change her behavior have been met with punishment. Is she likely to clean the living room the next day? It's doubtful. She's likely to think, "Well, if I clean the living room, he'll just complain about the bedroom." Even if the husband is totally upset with how the rest of the house looks, he needs to try to be patient, gradually encouraging the type of cleaning behavior that he wants from his wife through reinforcement. Similarly, if the wife is trying to get him to be more involved with the children, it is important that she not wait until he has become the perfect dad before starting to make positive comments.

Positive reinforcement can sometimes build a strong sense of goodwill between partners which carries far beyond the original problem. If the wife reinforces the husband for washing the outside of her car,

she may find that he next cleans the inside of her car. And if she keeps reinforcing him, he may go on to do other car related or household chores as well. One disadvantage of reinforcement is that we never know where it will lead. And one delightful advantage of reinforcement is that we never know where it will lead! It usually leads somewhere positive. One place where positive reinforcement can lead is "positive reciprocity." This means that we tend to get back what we give. The wife brings a sandwich to her husband in the workshop, and he may give her back a hug. When we start giving out positively reinforcing behaviors to our spouse, we are likely to receive back other pleasant behaviors from them. Now, it would be unreasonable to expect this type of reciprocity immediately. But in the long run, when we want positive behaviors from our spouse, we are most likely to get them if we have been giving them out freely.

Reinforcing your partner may require you to reorient yourself to a new way of relating--focusing on what they are doing "right" rather than what they are doing "wrong." ("Right" and "wrong" are put in quotes because these are defined by what you want them to do or don't want them to do!) Simply paying attention to their positive, constructive behaviors can have a beneficial impact on how you feel about them. Another advantage of trying to change your partner's behavior in this way is that they tend to be more open to any feedback you give them and less likely to be defensive. It is as if we are saying to them, "You are so wonderful, and all you have to do to keep being wonderful is just keep doing what you are already doing." Who can resist that? Who doesn't want to hear that? It is also important to keep in mind that if your spouse does follow through with what we are asking of them, you need to cease any griping or nagging. (We don't recommend griping or nagging in the first place, but then we realize that humans being what they are, we need to include this point.) When our unpleasant behaviors cease, then this provides still another type of reinforcement for our spouse. But if we don't stop our complaining, at least for awhile, then they are likely to think, "What's the use? It doesn't make any difference to them if I do what they ask or not. They are still unhappy."

What if reinforcement does not seem to be working? Or what if there seems to be little or no opportunity to provide reinforcement? There are times that we just can't wait around for the other person to do something differently. In this type of situation, we have to be more assertive about expressing what our desires and needs are. By being direct and telling the other person what we need or want, we may be able to prompt them to try something new or different. But it is still important to be ready to reinforce them if they follow through.

When asking a partner to change their behavior, they may become defensive. In order to minimize this, it is helpful to follow a few guidelines:

- Provide the feedback about what you don't like and the request for what you want from them in private.
- Make the request in a straightforward non-emotional tone of voice if possible.
- Don't ask for more than one or two changes at a time. Don't throw everything and the kitchen sink at them all at once; if you do, they may throw your requests right down it.
- Make a positive request rather than a negative request (example: I would really appreciate it if you could speak to me in a calm tone when you are discussing a problem. Try to focus on what you want in a positive way rather than on what they are doing "wrong.")

If your spouse still doesn't seem to want to change, consider making an agreement or behavior exchange. If you are desperate to take a vacation, but he's a workaholic and says he just can't get off of work right now, perhaps there is something that he would want from you that you could offer in exchange. This type of "contracting" can be useful when people have different agendas and are having difficulty coming to an agreement.

If the behavior at issue is very negative, such as a spouse coming home drunk and being verbally abusive, then firm consequences have to be put in place and enforced. For example, a spouse might say, "The next time this happens, I will be spending the night somewhere else." This is the opposite of positive reinforcement. It is actually a form of punishment. By and large punishment is not a good way of changing behavior because it tends to lead to only temporary change. However, in some marital situations, there may be no alternative.

Learning to Receive Feedback as Well as Giving It

Marriages need to have some give and take between partners. Another way to put this is that they need some kind of a pressure release valve. Bringing up problems and talking with each other is that release valve. However, some people are not very good at hearing that there might be a problem with some of their behavior. They become immediately defensive, reacting with anger or rage, so that the other spouse learns not to bring up problems. When this happens, then the other spouse can keep their feelings stuffed down deep and out of sight. As a result, both positive and negative emotions can end up pushed out of awareness, leading to smoldering resentment and a loss of loving feelings.

If you find yourself becoming defensive, listen for something that your partner is saying that makes sense to you. Focus on that rather than immediately becoming upset and attacking them. You can come back later and tell them what you disagree with.

Getting Personal

Consider your own behavior when your partner asks you to change. When they bring up a behavior of yours that is a problem for them, do you

- A. Immediately erupt with anger?*
- B. Deny that there is a problem?*
- C. Admit to the circumstances but discount it by saying that it's not a "big deal"?*
- D. Become defensive and point out the other person's inadequacies?*
- E. Look for something which is reasonable in what they are saying and try to relate to that?*
- F. Feel as if they are trying to control you?*

In the end, do you

- A. Make the change they are requesting?*

- B. Placate them for awhile and then go back to how you were acting before?*
- C. Resent that they ever brought up the issue in the first place?*
- D. Look for ways to get back at them?*
- E. Keep thinking about their feedback and considering it?*

Strategy Number 4: Using Problem-Solving to Overcome Difficulties

A major problem in troubled relationships is an inability to solve problems. It is not unusual, for example, for a distressed couple just entering therapy to have great difficulty solving a relatively small issue. After learning the above communication skills, problem solving tends to improve. However, even more improvement can occur with a little practice using some straightforward steps: (a) selecting and stating a problem; (b) listing possible alternative solutions; (c) agreeing on a final solution; and (d) evaluating and refining the solution.

1. Selecting and Clarifying a Problem

When beginning therapy, most couples are fairly vague in how they describe problems to one another or to the therapist. It is harder to come to a solution when it isn't clear what the problem is. For example, suppose a wife accuses her husband of being "uncaring" about her and her feelings. There is relatively little chance of working on this problem until she explains what she means. She may mean that he will go out with his friends and be very talkative but that he won't talk with her very much. Yet he may not understand this until it is more clearly explained. In some cases arguments start quickly because partners are talking about two different things. In such a situation it is easy for one person to feel unfairly accused and to become defensive.

In addition to being specific, another way to prevent defensiveness is to keep from personalizing difficulties. That is, if possible avoid labeling the other person as the problem. When you have an issue that you want to discuss with your spouse, think of it as a challenge that both of you are facing rather than being purely your partner's fault. In that way, the two of you can team up against the problem. As long as it is seen as being totally due to one person ("The problem is you're insensitive"), then you will be working against each other.

Example of personalizing a problem as due to one partner:	Example of “externalizing” a problem so the couple can work on as a team:
“I don’t know why you keep inviting your mother over. You don’t leave us any time together.”	“I would like to have more time alone with you. We need to have your mother over from time to time, but I’ve noticed that I’m feeling left out. What can we do to meet her needs but also make sure that our relationship needs get met?”
“You never clean up the house.”	“I’m frustrated about how the house looks. What can be done to keep it more straight and picked up?”
“You’re not getting Samantha to school on time.”	“Samantha is tardy to school so much that she is getting into trouble. We need to find ways to deal with her lateness.”

2. Brainstorming Possibilities

Now it’s time to look at some options. Problem solving proceeds by generating as many alternatives as possible until the couple’s creativity has been exhausted. Humor can also be useful in coming up with innovative solutions. It helps to overcome rigid ideas about what can work and what won’t work. Alternative solutions need to be stated in specific, clear terms. It does not help to decide on a solution of “I will try harder.” That’s too vague, and it is not a clear behavior. It is also not observable, so it won’t be clear if both persons were actually carrying out the solution if it is chosen. If nothing happens, the person can still say, “Well, I did try harder.” For that reason, it is best for possible solutions to be clearly observable behaviors.

Couples often get stuck in their problem solving when they think that there are only two solutions to a problem: the husband’s way and the wife’s way. Usually, this isn’t true. Most of the time, there are a variety of solutions to a problem. People often feel a sense of relief when they realize that there are numerous possibilities and that they don’t have to just choose between only two. In therapy, couples are often encouraged to try the brainstorming method in which all possible solutions are put forward before choosing one. In the process of coming up with 15 to 20 solutions, it is likely that the couple will come up with new ideas rather than simply opting for a solution which they have tried.

3. Agreeing on one or more solutions to try

The next step in the problem-solving process involves the couple choosing their “best” alternative. This is sometimes a compromise and may not make either partner ecstatic. But the solution must be

Now, share one of the less important ones with your spouse. Explain to your partner that you are not interested in criticizing them and that you just want to brainstorm some possible solutions to this problem. Try to engage your partner in the problem solving process. By starting with an issue which is less important and less emotional for you, it is more likely that you and your partner will be able to think clearly about alternative solutions.

FAQ: Frequently asked questions

What if I want to do something to improve the quality of my marriage, but my spouse won't cooperate with me?

This is a difficult question with which marital therapists often have to contend. Change is certainly easier if both spouses are willing to work on the problems in a marriage. But one sided work on a relationship is not impossible. In one of the sections above, for example, we have already looked at using positive reinforcement. In addition, we have also seen how positive changes on your part will often lead to positive changes in your spouse. Finally, better communication on the part of either partner will help defuse potential arguments. There is actually a great deal which can be done by one partner alone. However, it is much easier to develop strategies in this type of situation if you have a therapist to assist you.

Strategy Number 5: Working on Negative Thinking--The Destroyer of Relationships

Chapter/handout 3 explains the role of negative thinking in causing stress. Negative thoughts about our partner gradually weaken the attachment we feel for him or her. Over time the bonding between two people can be irreparably damaged.

When we apply negative thoughts to ourselves, the effect is generally to produce low self-esteem or guilt. This could happen, for example, is one often had the thought, "I'm a rotten husband." However, when we have negative thoughts about our spouses, the effect tends to make us upset or angry with them. Examples of negative thoughts about a spouse might be: "she's no good; she doesn't really care about me; she just thinks of herself." Negative thoughts can interfere with problem solving (e.g., "there's no point in trying"), and communication ("he won't listen anyway").

Here are some of the kinds of negative thinking that can occur in relationships. Each type of thought can be directed against ourselves or against our partner.

1. Ignoring the positive; disqualifying the positive; focusing on the negative.

When a relationship begins to be dysfunctional, it is typical that the partners start to focus more and more on the other's shortcomings. This creates an accelerating process of each being dissatisfied and then finding even more with which to be unhappy. For example, a husband's thought be, "My wife

isn't working on our relationship anymore; she just doesn't care." This thought could be a distortion. It could be overly focused on how his wife seems tired and distant at night, and it might be ignoring how she is keeping house, caring for four small children, cooking, attending school conferences, and so on.

2. Overgeneralizing. Statements that use the words "anything," "nothing," "always", "never", "ever", "everyone", "no one," etc., are very likely to be overgeneralizations and to increase negative feelings:

“He never wants to go anywhere with me anymore.”

“She is always griping at me the moment I walk in the door.”

“He always wants to be with his friends instead of with me.”

“She never does anything spontaneously just to be nice to me anymore.”

These types of thoughts exaggerate the shortcomings of the partner and make us more dissatisfied with them.

3. Mislabeling. This involves using words to label your partner's behavior and to put a negative “spin” on it. Let's say that a husband or wife is really tired much of the time. Perhaps the spouse is working long hours, or maybe they are depressed. Then at home, the spouse does very little to help out. Their partner might think, “My spouse is just lazy; he's just a bum.” This would be mislabeling. In the situation above, the spouse is not lazy at all; he's probably either tired or depressed.

Or suppose that a man notices that his wife isn't being romantic and isn't wanting sex as much. An example of a mislabeling thought here could be, “My spouse doesn't love me anymore.” He is attributing her behavior to a lack of love when in fact there are many factors--both internal biological ones and external stresses--which could cause a lowering of her libido. If he is mislabeling the problem by saying that she doesn't love him, it will only make the husband angrier and confuse him about the real issue.

4. "Should" statements. Thoughts which use the words "should" and "ought" tend to produce guilt when turned against the self and anger when focused on others. For example, "I shouldn't have burdened my husband by telling him all my problems from today" would tend to make a wife feel guilty. The thought, “He should be more thoughtful than to leave his tools all over the garage” would tend to produce feelings of upset and anger directed towards the husband.

Consider how you might feel if you had the following series of “should” thoughts about your spouse:

My husband just isn't taking me out anymore. He should know that as a woman I need that. He shouldn't be so self-centered. He goes out with his friends, but he won't take me out. He should grow up. He's married now. He should show interest in me as his wife.

Most likely, this series of thoughts (using four different “shoulds”) would produce even greater anger and upset than existed before the thoughts.

If we voice our ideas out loud, “should” thoughts often put us in the role of a parent scolding a child. This is deadly for a marriage. We are not our spouse’s parent--we are their peer. It is best that we express our wishes as “wants” and maybe even “needs” but not as “shoulds.” Leave the “shoulds” for moral issues; that is where they belong.

5. All or nothing thinking. Sometimes persons have such high expectations of their spouses that even small disappointments lead to a feeling that their husband or wife has totally let them down. Perhaps the husband mowed the lawn but he didn’t edge or clean the garage. The wife may feel that he really hadn’t done much at all. This is a type of perfectionistic thinking. Either the other person does everything I expect of them or else they aren’t really trying. Or perhaps the wife has been wanting more affection and attention from the husband. He talks with her for fifteen minutes after supper then goes to his computer to work or play games. Her feeling may be that he hasn’t really changed at all rather than noting that he did spend more time with her than usual. If she says this out loud, he is likely to wonder if he can ever please her.

6. Mindreading. This has already been mentioned in communication skills. But there, the emphasis was on what we are saying out loud to our partner. Mind reading can go on in our own heads without our partner even knowing about it. And it can be just as destructive. This can occur in a variety of ways. One is by misinterpreting the other person’s motives.

“I know why he was willing to take this for me across town. He just wanted to stop off at the bar with the guys and have some drinks.”

Another way that this happens is when a depressed or anxious spouse is worrying about the commitment of the other spouse. They worry (or maybe “know”) that the other spouse is tired of them--wanting to leave them. Mindreading can involve projecting a variety of feelings into the other person’s mind. Some examples of this type of mindreading are:

“My partner is upset with me.”

“My partner is tired of me.”

“My partner is trying to pull one over on me.”

“My partner is wanting to leave me.”

Even though spouses typically know each other pretty well, mindreading is a problem to be avoided. If you need to know what your spouse is feeling, check it out with them.

7. Personalization. This behavior is similar to mind reading. For example, a spouse comes home and is grumpy. The other spouse may think, “He’s mad at me.” Of course, this is mindreading. But another important aspect of this type of thinking is that one is assuming that the partner’s behavior is about them. In fact, the mood of the person coming home may have nothing to do with their marriage or the other spouse. It may be about something that happened at work or about something else, such as how they are feeling physically.

Another type of personalization occurs when we take on all the responsibility for problems rather than

sharing them equally with our spouse:

“We just haven’t been getting along. It’s all my fault. If I wasn’t so depressed, we would both be happy.”

Maybe. But usually both spouses are contributing their own share to the unhappiness in the marriage. Accepting all of the responsibility for problems in a marriage is usually personalizing. It isn’t noble, and it doesn’t help to resolve problems.

8. Fortune telling. This involves jumping to conclusions about the future. Again, because we think we know our spouse, we sometimes assume that we know exactly what they are going to do. We may become discouraged and give up on them. We may not even attempt something with them because we “know” how they are going to respond.

“I’d like to go on vacation, but he would just tell me again that he’s too busy at work.”

“I want to have sex, but I’m tired of being turned down, and he would just say no again.”

If your spouse truly has a pattern of rejecting something over and over, you might want to try something a little different, such as

“I have something I want to talk to you about. I’ve been reluctant to bring it up because in the past it seemed that you were usually not interested. But it is important to me. I’d really like you to think about doing . . . “

Another form of fortune telling is to expect negative behavior from your spouse so that when you see them, you are ready for an argument:

“I bet he comes home tense and grouchy again tonight. Why can’t he just once come home and be pleasant. Well, I’m going to show him that two can play that game. . .”

This in turn can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She expects an argument, and that’s what she gets.

9. Reverse Fortune Telling. This involves jumping to conclusions about what the present would be like if one had acted differently in the past, such as, "If only I had married a different person, I would be happier." This kind of thought undermines the marriage. In many cases, there is actually no way of knowing whether one would have been happier or not. And this type of second guessing and dwelling on regrets does nothing to improve the present relationship.

But That’s Not All...

Unfortunately, there are even more ways that negative thinking can cause problems in our relationships. To use a phrase, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Here are some specific negative thoughts to watch out for in relationships.

“Here He/She Goes Again”

A special type of thinking in relationships is the thought, "Here she goes again." As human beings, we seem to want to simplify complex situations into simpler patterns. Early in a relationship, there are fewer such patterns built up in our minds. One behavior is simply one behavior, and we don't tend to overreact as much to something which is annoying. If our husband doesn't mow the lawn, it may be an issue, but it is also more likely to be treated as a single instance rather than as more example of some long standing pattern. But later in a relationship, we begin to form opinions about character traits. Then when our spouse does something to annoy us, it can carry with it the force of all of the other instances: "Here he goes again, playing golf with his buddies and leaving me at home. This is another example of him preferring his friends over me and distancing himself from me." The emotional reaction here tends to be stronger because the person is not just reacting to one event but to many.

What if it is true that your partner is doing something over and over again? First, try to respond to the behavior as a single instance if possible. Try to stay away from the idea that they have always been this way and always will be. Second, try to use your best communication skills. Try to stay objective and engage your partner in problem solving:

“There’s something I’d like to talk to you about. I know we’ve talked about this before, but it continues to be a problem for me. It seems like it keeps happening, and I’m really having a hard time dealing with it...”

Things to Do

In order to overcome any negative thinking biases which may have developed about your partner, it can be helpful to remind yourself of their positive qualities. List several things you like about your spouse. Here are some hints: their physical appearance, their talents, the things they do for others, their ability to have fun, the little things they do for you, their ability to care of business and be serious, their sense of humor, their spontaneity, their warmth, and so on.

--If my spouse doesn't change it is because he/she doesn't want to. My spouse could easily change, if he/she really cared.

--Marriages should meet all of a person's emotional needs.

Beliefs About Being Upset With Each Other

--Anger is the opposite of love. If my spouse is angry at me, he/she doesn't love me.

--If my spouse gets angry with me, I must have done something wrong. I must fix it immediately.

--If a spouse really loves you they shouldn't ever criticize you.

Beliefs About Romance

--The only purpose of marriage is romantic love. If romantic love diminishes, it means that the relationship is terribly flawed and that I married the wrong person.

--There is only one true partner that we are meant to have. If we are married to that one true love then we won't have major problems. If we have major problems, then we are married to the wrong person and need to look for someone else.

--A good marriage will just happen naturally. You shouldn't have to work at it.

Other Beliefs

--If you are too nice, your partner will take advantage of you.

--My spouse shouldn't change from the person I married. They should remain just the way they were.

It is important to examine your beliefs about marriage and to evaluate whether or not they are realistic. If you have one or more of the above beliefs, think it over. Discuss it with your spouse. See what they think. Ask your friends what they think, too.

Getting Personal

What are your expectations of marriage and relationships?

List some of the expectations you have about your spouse and about your marriage. Do any of these seem unrealistic to you when you write them down?

The Downward Spiral

Negative thinking can lead to a downward spiral in which the person becomes increasingly demoralized and angry. These upsetting feelings in turn cause even further negative thoughts about their partner and marriage. This produces a circular pattern which can be hard to stop. Here is an example of downward spiral thinking of a woman who feels really angry at her husband at the moment. He has bought himself a new boat and gone against her wishes:

"Looking back on things, he has never really been supportive of me and the children. He's always been selfish."

The more angry she becomes, the less she is able to remember anything positive about him, which in turn leads to further upset. Any favorable or complimentary memories about him are either not accessed or are disqualified as not being relevant anymore. For example, the wife might think, "All of those times that he would bring me things when we were dating, he was just putting on a show. Now I see the real person."

Here is a further example of the downward spiral:

"He had to work late again tonight. He doesn't care about my feelings."

"He never cares about my needs. (Disqualifying other behaviors, such as taking care of her when she was ill, taking her on trips, keeping up the house and car etc.)"

"The *&\$# will never change. He'll always just think of himself."

"When we were dating, he said that he loved the opera. That was probably just a line to sound good and impress me."

"I'm so mad, I'm not even going to talk to him tonight. That will teach him. He can just guess what I'm angry about."

The downward spiral could continue if she provokes an argument with the husband when he gets home. For example, she might refuse to talk to him and give him the silent treatment, thereby triggering some negative behavior on his part.



Points to Ponder

In some marriages, the communication between partners is like a rack of billiard balls.

When one ball is hit, there is an automatic and inevitable reaction from all of the others. The automatic reaction may be in our own head, when a cascade of negative thoughts is triggered. Or the reaction may be in the quick, defensive response of the spouse. Such reactions in our heads and in our marriages are destructive. What is needed is a type of shock absorber between thoughts and actions, so that one thought or deed does not automatically lead to another negative thought or deed.

Once Communication Ceases, Problems Accelerate

When partners have been arguing for a long period of time, they start to give up on the idea that they can truly communicate their feelings and point of view to their partner. They may begin to feel that anything they say will lead to an argument, and so they may choose to say nothing at all. Once communication stops between partners, even little problems go unresolved. Further misunderstandings start to occur. While the silence and distance which grow up may prevent ongoing daily spats, they do not prevent major problems from occurring. In fact, the silence tends to lead to major, long standing, and difficult to resolve issues. Rather than allow communication to stop, it is best for couples to enter counseling or to find new ways of communicating with each other.

In Summary...

There are a variety of ways that a couple can enhance their relationship, both through increasing positive actions and decreasing destructive behaviors. The five major ways which have been discussed in this chapter/handout are

- Providing support for each other
- Improving levels of intimacy
- Creating positive communication
- Improving problem solving
- Reducing negative thinking

These are certainly the not only ways to improve a relationship, but they will go a long way to enhancing the positive feelings and bonding between partners.

Other chapters which you may find helpful and are relevant to coping with relationship problems include:

- Chapter 3 Coping with Negative Thoughts
- Chapter 4 You Can Assert Yourself
- Chapter 7 Coping with Depression--A Look at Relationships
- Chapter 8 Coping with Grief
- Chapter 14 Coping with Relationship Problems
- Chapter 15 Coping with Anger

Further Reading for Clients

Beck, A.T. (1988). Love is never enough. New York: Harper and Row.

Gottman, J.M., & Silver, N. (1999). The seven principles for making marriage work. New York: Crown Publishers.

Page, S. (1994). Eight essential traits of couples who thrive. New York: Dell Publishers.

Hendrix, H. (1988). Getting the love you want: A guide for couples. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Tannen, D. (1990). You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation. New York: Ballentine Books.

Wallerstein, J., & Blakeslee, S. (1995). The good marriage: How and why love lasts. New York: Warner.

Further Reading for Therapists

Baucom, D.H., & Epstein, N. (1990). Cognitive-behavioral marital therapy. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Jacobson, N. S., & Margolin, G. (1979). Marital therapy: Strategies based on social learning and behavior exchange principles. New York: Brunner/Mazel.