

***Couples' Guidelines for Mature Arguing
and Effective Communication***

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Introduction

In order to continually improve your marriage or love relationship, both partners need to openly communicate with one another on a regular basis. You need to disclose your honest feelings, thoughts, needs, wants, inner self-talk, dreams, aspirations and goals. It also helps to be consistently understanding, affectionate, forgiving, trusting, grateful and compromising.

Here are some concise tools or rules to remember when communicating and entering into conflicts, arguments or uncomfortable conversations with your partner. When practiced, these principles will help to improve and eventually revitalize your relationship. They will serve to reduce your number of angry conflicts, lessen your emotional pain, solve some problems, break through your stuck impasses, and arouse your love for one another. Or, they will show you how stuck, stubborn or intractable you are. For some couples, these guidelines will make it clear to them that they can't or won't change and that they need to separate from one another. Whatever the outcome, you will feel more insightful and relieved.

To change your arguing and communication styles will take time and effort. Together, as a couple, you have already developed habitual ways of arguing and communicating. Making changes will take discipline and conscientiousness. By following some of my suggestions below, you will be able to break some negative habits and replace them with more effective and caring behaviors.

Below is a list of actions to take as well as actions to avoid when engaging in an argument.

If you follow some of these suggestions, then your arguing will become more mature and productive and less conflictual and destructive to one another. Engaging in these behaviors and approaches will enhance your trust, empathy and affection for your partner.

Actively Practice the Following Helpful Behaviors

Here is a list of recommended behaviors and positions to take while discussing emotionally charged topics:

Hug Each Other Daily: To build trust, develop listening skills and pave the way for future open discussions, hug each other for 7 seconds 5 times per day. Build-in more warm and affectionate interactions into your relationship on a daily basis. Regular and meaningful hugs create a sense of security and safety and ensure openness and receptivity in one another. Hugging erodes defensiveness and hostility. Genuine affection builds love and trust in one another and prepares you for difficult discussions. Love enables vulnerability and generosity. You want each other to feel as secure as possible on a daily basis.

Prime Each Other to Prepare the Way: When one of you feels angry or detects that you are both entering into a heightened disagreement, stop and tell your partner that you believe a conflict or argument has started. Do not stop the heated feelings but do get confirmation from your partner. Verbally validate that an argument has started. Get a verbal agreement from your partner, recognizing that it has begun. Then, once agreed, tell one another that you care and that you are going to strive to listen well. Hug one another and then sit down.

Take Your Seated Positions: When engaging in a meaningful, intense or hot conversation, break the habit of automatically escalating or withdrawing. Take a better position. Make the discussion purposeful and consciously in your control.

Stop, take a breath and sit down facing one another. Sit down in chairs of the same height directly opposite one another. Pull up close to one another so that your knees touch. Face one another eye-to-eye. Rest your hands on your thighs able to freely reach out and touch each other's hands and knees. Touch hands and look in each other's eyes as much as possible throughout the conversation. This seating arrangement helps you to remain connected, present and honest. Remain seated like this until the discussion is completed and you are ready to dis-engage.

Make "I" Statements: Strive to always make "I" statements, such as "I feel/think/believe/perceive/guess/know/accept/interpreted/saw/want/need". In this way, you take responsibility for what you say and don't become accusatory of your partner. When making "I" statements, your partner can listen to you much easier.

When making "You" statements, your partner will likely become more defensive, feel attacked or blamed. They may believe that you are coming from a superior position instead of talking with one another as equals. When you catch yourself making "You" statements or your partner points it out, then acknowledge it, apologize and immediately make a correction by using an "I" statement.

Be Loving: Take a loving stance when starting your conversation. Try to be as open and vulnerable, trusting and honest, caring and understanding as possible. Early on in the discussion, strive not to become defensive. Share as openly as possible.

Listen Carefully: Strive to listen with curiosity to what is being communicated. Take it all in. In your head, privately, try not to criticize or judge what is being said and don't prepare your defensive comeback or set of questions. Just absorb it all in without worrying about your response. Be as receptive as possible. Tune-in and don't space-out. Give to your partner by listening deeply to what they have to say.

It's helpful to pause after your partner finishes talking. Take a quick breather. Don't jump right in with a comeback. There is no rush to reply. Don't feel pressured to respond immediately. Take some time to reflect and contemplate what your partner said before replying. Collect your thoughts and then respond thoughtfully.

Sparingly, ask direct and simple questions for clarity. Only interrupt when necessary. Make sure you understand what they are saying. Remember - every person wants to be seen, heard and known.

Speak Intentionally: Allow about 50% talking time and 50% listening time between the two of you. Make it balanced. Be fair and take equal turns talking and listening. Allow the designated speaker to elect a specific topic and talk about it for 2 to 3 minutes. After 2 to 3 minutes, stop talking and let the listener respond. Pause and allow some silence between talkers. Go back and forth this way, gradually working on one single subject until it is resolved as much as possible.

Reciprocity and fairness build safety and mutual respect. When talking for more than 3 minutes, the speaker may start to dominate the listener and the listener may begin to resent this imbalance and start to give up or lose track of the speaker's issue. Both of you need to stay on track and process what is being said back and forth without getting overwhelmed with ideas and reactions.

Remember that the listener is having reactions to you and their feelings interfere with their ability to take in what you have to say. This is why you want to deliver your ideas in short 2 to 3 minute segments. Shorter talking periods allow focused back and forth communication.

Focus on Only One Topic at a Time: Select and stay on one single issue or subject until you both feel complete in discussing it. Present and focus on only one topic until that particular issue is fully dealt with. Remain focused. Know your priorities and don't get side-tracked. Take your time and move ahead slowly.

Stick to current issues of current importance. Stay away from talking too much about distant past problems and memories. Focus on telling your partner what you are feeling now and recently.

Don't flood your listener with a complex set of multiple ideas, historical events, theories or speculations to think about and respond to. Explain your issue in a simple and direct manner. Also, tell them clearly what you need and want. Change the topic when the subject you are working on seems to be resolved and when both of you agree to change the topic.

Say Exactly What You Mean: Be direct, concise and simple in your language so that your partner understands. Don't use vague language, complex sentences or talk for too long without the other being able to interact with you. Be very clear so that your partner understands you. Don't assume that your partner always understands exactly what you are talking about.

Speak deliberately, calmly and slowly at a low enough volume so that your partner can hear you well and try to process the ideas, feelings and perspectives that you are presenting. Get directly to the point. Tell them what you want and need. Don't beat around the bush. Don't be defensive or cryptic. Avoid presenting theories and speculations.

Make Sure the Listener Understands: After talking and focusing on an issue, ask the listener to repeat back what you said in their own words. Make sure that they understand you. Don't assume that they comprehended all that you said. After talking, take the time to confirm that they are following your train of thought. Ask them to repeat and explain to you what they heard you say. Have them tell you what they heard you say. Make sure that they are listening well.

If they don't quite understand or miss a part of it, carefully address the issue again to make sure that they understand you fully. Then, have them repeat it to you again to clarify that they understand.

Be Dead Honest: Tell the truth. Say what you feel, know and believe. Have integrity. Say what you believe to be true without fearing the other's reaction.

Be Kind, Courteous and Generous: Listen gratefully and allow the other to say all that they need to say, to go as far as they need. It is always better to give more than you expect or want to give. Generous giving is usually appreciated and demonstrates your love and concern. Kindness and generosity will be noticed and remembered by your partner.

Respect Personal Boundaries: Be aware of the other's emotional and physical sensitivities. Accept some of their limits and vulnerabilities. Don't be invasive or purposefully push their buttons to upset them.

Be Grateful, Forgiving and Appreciative: Remember that your partner is the person that you voluntarily chose to be your partner. Don't forget that in the past you loved them passionately. You are in this relationship voluntarily, not by force. So, be thankful for what you have and what you have built together. Keep in mind that you may be able to overcome problems and continue to build a wonderful future together. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt and don't expect perfection from them or yourself.

Be Affectionate and Soothing: When you are able, let your partner know that you love them despite the anger, frustration and difficulty in the moment. Reassure them that you are doing alright and managing the discussion despite the negativity and reactivity. Show affection with your touch, eye contact and tone of voice. This type of action is calming and demonstrates that you are both still connected on a deep level. Let them know that you understand that this is a

temporary heated engagement that will die down soon enough. Allow yourself to be open and vulnerable and sensitive to yourself and to your partner.

Take Risks: Have trust that revealing yourself, some of your secret feelings, thoughts and desires, will not be too destructive or hurtful. Have faith in honesty and transparency. Without risk-taking, progress will not be made. Taking risks and saying and doing something new forces your perceptual and communication habits to shift. Risk-taking demonstrates love and trust in the other. Taking a risk usually increases the empathy in your partner for you and demonstrates a commitment to the relationship. Risks are imperative to drive progress and create breakthroughs. Make risky disclosures so that your partner has a chance to know who you really are and what goes on privately within you. Dare to take a chance. Have faith that new actions and disclosures will not create an out-of-control situation.

Take Time-Outs: When necessary, engage in short “time-outs”. Remain connected and together as long as you can tolerate it. Realize that at times a partner may feel flooded or overwhelmed with negative feelings that they cannot handle. If at a certain point you feel that you cannot remain in the discussion, fear that you are losing control, or need to separate for a while, then request a brief time-out session.

Allow each other to verbally call for a “time-out” and raise your hands in front of your face to make a symbolic “T” to signal that you need a break. When asking for a time-out, also state for how long you will need some separate space and let them know verbally where you will be going to take a break. Go there to breath and calm down. Confirm that you are willing to re-engage after the time-out period and that you need to “cool down”, “take a breather” or “collect your thoughts” before resuming the discussion.

Time-outs are important maneuvers when trying to de-escalate or defuse a heated discussion. At times, it is helpful to suspend the conflict for a while. One or both of you may need to rest and re-gather your thoughts and emotions. Periodic short periods of time apart may work very well for you two to get “unstuck” or to soothe hurt feelings. Time-outs can free-up partners who feel trapped or sucked into a negative, confused and painful state. This gives you both time to separate from one another and recompose yourselves.

Time-outs are not escapes. They are protective actions to ensure that listening continues and that regrettable statements and hurtful accusations are not released. When intense anger or confusion arise, disarm them with a “moratorium” period. Take the time to “re-coup”.

The person requesting the time-out may feel some relief. However, the other partner may initially feel more aggravation or frustration when the time-out is requested. However, always allow the time-out to take place for a few minutes of rest. Be reassured that you will come back together soon when you are both more relaxed and prepared to continue the discussion.

Reveal Feelings and Thoughts: Share openly the ideas and emotions that you are experiencing regardless if they are negative, humorous, embarrassing or shameful. Let your partner enter into your personal inner experience. Allow them to see how you feel and think.

Permit them to know what is stirring you up and what memories and images get activated. Allow them to know how your inner critical voices and beliefs work inside you and how they control and talk to you. Disclose your weaknesses and emotional triggers. Let them see how your past experiences and memories affect your current status. Allow them to understand your automatic inner workings, worries, doubts and pain. Reveal your inner destructive and negative experiences. Let go. Sharing on a deep level can create closeness and trigger trust and empathy in your partner beyond your belief.

Don't pretend or cover-up. Disclosing private inner feelings and thoughts demonstrates trust, vulnerability and openness. The more you can reveal what's happening within you in the present moment, the deeper and more meaningful your discussions will become. Take risks and have faith in deep sharing.

Stay in the "Now": During difficult interactions, you will have memories and want to talking about past behaviors and feelings. That is natural. However, you can also focus on how you are feeling and what you are thinking right now, in the present moment. This is another risk-taking behavior because it makes you feel vulnerable. Let your partner know what you are experiencing now. This will reveal a lot about yourself. It will also encourage your partner to become more vulnerable with you and bring your partner into the present moment with you.

Think about it. What else do we really have other than right now, the present moment? The present experience is all we have. It is real. The past is gone and unrepeatable. The future is not yet within our grasp. To be in the "Now" is to be authentic and real.

Stick with Your Personal Morals and Values: Don't allow yourself to violate your inner integrity and principles. Stick with your true needs and beliefs.

Share Your Vision: Remember that you are a couple sharing your life together. Talk about your future goals and aspirations together. Stay in touch with these and keep them alive. If you fear that your mutual vision is being threatened, then bring your vision of a hoped-for future into the conversation. Review, negotiate and modify it as needed.

State Your Perceived Needs: If you need something for yourself or from your partner, then make a direct statement or request. Let them know. You need to feel secure and safe. You need to believe that you are on a healthy path to a better future with your needs being met.

You have needs. Your partner has needs. Try to meet your needs and their needs. You may need to "stretch" yourself in order to meet your partner's needs. This is what love is all about – purposefully meeting some of their real needs. Reveal your personal needs, even if they are embarrassing or seem silly and immature. Assist your partner to recognize and articulate their needs clearly. Openly request that your needs be satisfied. Only then can you both move forward. The more you can meet one another's true needs, the more progress and love you will make. This is the art of loving giving.

Remember, "needs" are different than "wants". Needs are necessary and very important to be fulfilled. Needs must be satisfied or you and your partner will suffer. Wants, on the other hand,

would like to be met but they are not necessary. Strive to distinguish between “needs” and “wants” and always prioritize needs over wants.

Clarify Your Goals: When in a heated discussion, confirm your mutual and personal goals in order to stay on-track. After all, your personal and relationship lives are both directed by your goals. Identify your personal as well as your mutual goals. Don't overlook them. Discuss and confirm them as frequently as needed. Admit when you have gone “off-track”. Get back “on-track”. If necessary, discuss how your goals can be modified. Express your feelings about your goals. Tell your partner how significant your goals are. Express the meaning and importance that they have for you. Reveal the feelings that you have invested in each goal. Let your partner know how reaching, changing or letting them go impacts you directly.

Help Your Partner Reach Their Goals: The more you can assist your partner to realize their individual aspirations, the better off you and your partner will be. Get behind their goals and help them achieve those goals. Your partner will be thankful for your generosity and become a happier person to love and live with.

Change Your Mind: It is permissible to change a decision, a position or an opinion about an issue or agreement after receiving more information or perspective. Give each other the freedom and leeway to communicate changes and shifting perspectives, insights and ideas. Naturally, we all change over time. Being stubborn achieves little.

Accept Responsibility: Take responsibility for all of your statements during a hot discussion. Own all of your own feelings and thoughts that arise in your body and mind during your conversation no matter how much you want to blame your partner. Be accountable for what you say and do. Take responsibility for what emotions get triggered and activated in you. Your inner pain and reactivity are not always your partner's responsibility. Your partner does not directly create or stimulate your emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Most of your feelings and thoughts lie dormant within you and they may be triggered from the outside by your partner. These reactions are your vulnerabilities and automatic reactions. For some people, they may be related to past experiences. However, you are responsible for how your feelings and thoughts are expressed and acted-out.

Apologize: At times, you will say something that you did not mean. You will state some things incorrectly, distort memories or hurt your partner unnecessarily. Take the high road and admit your errors and faulty memories during a hot engagement. Don't go cold on your partner. Stay in touch and recognize when you exaggerated, went over the line, made a mistake or interrupted the conversation.

When you make a mistake, exaggerate, distort or regret what you say or do, then tell them that you are sorry for what you said or did. Don't wait. Do it immediately. This action will diffuse negativity. Be big. Take responsibility. Hold yourself accountable for your hurtful comments.

This honorable approach builds caring and empathy in your partner and combats the negative images that they hold about you. Apologies will be reciprocated. It is better to over-apologize than to under-apologize.

Watch Automatic Assumptions and Expectations: Assumptions and expectations always sneak into our conversations. They are tricky devils and constantly need to be identified if you want to be in reality. Assumptions and expectations work unconsciously out of your awareness. Try to become more aware of how assumptions and expectations automatically operate in you, interfere in your life and disrupt your relationship.

Be Open to Options: Be willing to seriously consider new ideas and possibilities presented to you. Compromise and negotiate with your partner. Don't demand that only your ideas be considered and that yours are superior and must be agreed to. Be flexible, not stubborn and closed-minded. This is your saving grace toward salvaging your relationship.

Accept That Change Is Slow: Human beings do not change behaviors or surrender their feelings and thoughts easily or rapidly. Stretching and expanding, growing and shifting, letting go and taking on new ways of being, developing and evolving – all take time. Be realistic in your expectations for yourself, your partner and your relationship. Getting “unstuck” and overcoming “gridlock” are challenging struggles. Be tolerant and patient. Be a partner and not an enemy or saboteur. Build increased empathy for your partner and yourself one step at a time.

Nurture what you want. Revitalize what you have. Put in the necessary effort to get what you need or want. Accept that some problems are solvable and others are not solvable.

Use Humor and Playfulness: Arguments and fights don't always need to be heavy and serious. Sprinkle in lightness, fun, love and fond memories. Don't always be intense and unmovable. Now and then, break up your discussions with humor. Joke around when appropriate. Occasionally, bring in some pleasurable and joyful interaction.

Close with a Hug: When your discussion has ended, give each other a good warm 7-second hug. Hold on to each other. Feel and smell their body. Fully embrace them. Melt into your partner for a few seconds and try to sense their caring and love for you. Be thankful for your partner's participation and acknowledge their hard work.

Avoid the Following Destructive Behaviors

Here is a list of harmful behaviors and positions to avoid while discussing emotionally charged topics:

Consciously avoid these behaviors and admit to violations and trespasses in these areas. They injure your relationship and future discussions. They tend to get you stuck, injure the other emotionally, and make it hard to solve problems and move forward in secure trust. These behaviors destroy love and trust.

Do NOT: Control, blame, belittle, humiliate, pressure, threaten, intimidate, bully, accuse, distort, attack, rant and rave, criticize, yell, explode, win, conquer, lie, deceive, pretend, punish, cover-up, abandon, coerce, dominate, over-react, exaggerate, withhold, stone-wall, shut-down, manipulate, persevere, submit, criticize, denigrate, shame, embarrass, give-up, reject or idealize your partner. Do not demand or agree to instant changes. Do not assassinate character or use sarcasm, profanities, obscenities and offensive language. Do not allow yourselves to argue after drinking alcohol.

Stay Away from Being: right, superior, hostile, threatening, desperate, defensive, passivity, impenetrable, evasive, avoidant, top-dog and victorious.

Watch How You: interfere, stop listening, stifle progress, use gestures and body language, space-out and drift away, raise your voice, project parental images onto one another, withdraw too quickly and often, pursue too intensely, act like your parents, behave contemptuously, shut them down, blame and accuse, take a superior position, make “You” statements, use too many words, use offensive psychological jargon, make excuses, interrupt frequently, take the issue “off track”, hurt your partner’s feelings, challenge their self-esteem, hold back your thoughts and feelings, or denigrate and put your partner down.

No Violence or Threats: do not tolerate violent behavior. Do not allow physical or verbal threats to be a part of your arguments. These behaviors are not permissible. They kill trust, end communication and destroy relationships rapidly. Do not mix arguments with alcohol.

Both partners must feel safe throughout heated discussions. If either partner becomes threatening or violent, move to a safe place immediately or call for help. Do not tolerate grabbing, shoving, pushing, holding, slapping, throwing or breaking objects. These are intimidating and out of control behaviors. No person deserves to be physically hurt or frightened because of a disagreement. Don't martyr yourself.

Once violence or threats occur, refuse to talk seriously again alone with your partner unless you are in a safe place with a therapist present.

Arguing is inevitable in all relationships. Some couples manage conflict pretty well. It's tolerable and non-harmful. Unfortunately, other couples continually and repeatedly hurt one another emotionally. They are stuck in a destructive pattern. These couples gradually erode and destroy their loving relationship.

If you can keep some of these principles and guidelines in mind in the heat of an argument, your relationship and your communication skills will improve. Through practice, you both can change and evolve and then participate in more fulfilling ways of processing disagreements. Arguing will become less painful and destructive. If you can adhere to practicing just a few of these rules

mentioned above, then you will make a positive impact on your conversations and their outcomes. You can improve your communication and arguing style and get better results.

If you cannot successfully follow some of these recommendations to improve your style of arguing and get caught-up in perpetual conflict, anger and frustration, then find a therapist to work with who specializes in couple therapy.

Even though arguments are painful, there are many benefits derived from productive arguing and effective communication. You have nothing to lose by engaging in these guidelines and getting different results. Be more mindful and experimental. Your improved communication style will help you to grow and become a more mature, positive and stronger person. And, most importantly, these disciplines will assist you to develop a more loving and gratifying relationship. What could be better than that?