



COMMUNICATION

"It takes two to speak the truth...one to speak and another to hear."

—Henry David Thoreau

ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness is the ability to express your feelings and ask for what you want in the relationship.

Assertiveness is a valuable communication skill. In successful couples, both individuals tend to be quite assertive. Rather than assuming their partner can read their minds, they share how they feel and ask clearly and directly for what they want.

Assertive individuals take responsibility for their messages by using "I" statements. They avoid statements beginning with "you." In making constructive requests, they are positive and respectful in their communication. They use polite phrases such as "please" and "thank you".

Examples of Assertive Statements

"I'm feeling out of balance. While I love spending time with you, I also want to spend time with my friends. I would like us to find some time to talk about this."

"I want to take a ski vacation next winter, but I know you like to go to the beach. I'm feeling confused about what choice we should make."

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is the ability to let your partner know you understand them by restating their message.

Good communication depends on you carefully listening to another person. Active listening involves listening attentively without interruption and then restating what was heard. Acknowledge content AND the feelings of the speaker. The active listening process lets the sender know whether or not the message they sent was clearly understood by having the listener restate what they heard.

Examples of Active Listening

"I heard you say you are feeling 'out of balance'; and enjoy the time we spend together but that you also need more time to be with your friends. You want to plan a time to talk about this."

"If I understand what you said, you are concerned because you want to go skiing next winter. But you think I would rather to go to the beach. Is that correct?"

When each person knows what the other person feels and wants (assertiveness) and when each knows they have been heard and understood (active listening), intimacy is increased. These two communication skills can help you grow closer as a couple.



COMMUNICATION

"It is a luxury to be understood."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

CREATING A WISH LIST

In this exercise, you will each individually make a Wish List of things you would like more or less of in your relationship. Next, take turns sharing your Wish Lists with each other.

Assertiveness is the ability to express your feelings and ask for what you want in your relationship.

Active listening is the ability to let your partner know you understand them by restating their message.

In sharing your Wish List with your partner, you will be demonstrating your Assertiveness skills. In giving feedback to your partner about their Wish List, you will be demonstrating your Active Listening skills.

Make a Wish List of three things you would like more or less of in your relationship.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SHARING YOUR WISH LIST

Take turns sharing your Wish List with each other, keeping in mind the following:

- Speaker's Job:
 - Speak for yourself ("I" statements e.g. "I wish...").
 - Describe how you would feel if your wish came true.
- Listener's Job:
 - Repeat/summarize what you have heard.
 - Describe the wish AND how your partner would feel if the wish came true.

COUPLE DISCUSSION

After completing the Wish List Exercise, discuss the following questions:

- How good were each of you at being assertive?
- In what ways did you each effectively use active listening skills?





PERSONAL STRESS PROFILE

"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." —Reinhold Niebuhr

IDENTIFYING MOST CRITICAL ISSUES

Do you control stress in your life or does stress control you?

Stressors are events that cause an emotional and/or physical reaction. Stress can be positive (wedding, job promotion) or negative (loss of job, car accident, major illness). But what is important is to be able to manage the many stressors in your life.

One way to manage stress is to prioritize the issues that are most important to you. Another is to decide what issues can be changed or resolved and which ones cannot. This exercise will help you focus on the high priority issues and those that can be changed (Box 1).

COUPLE EXERCISE

1. Select up to **four issues** that are the most stressful for each of you.
2. Review each issue and put it into one of the four cells below. (Box 1 contains the "Most Critical Issues.")

	Able to Change	Difficult to Change
High Priority	<div>Box 1</div> <div>MOST CRITICAL ISSUES</div> <div>What changes can you each make?</div>	<div>Box 2</div> <div></div> <div>How do you plan to cope?</div>
Low Priority	<div>Box 3</div> <div></div> <div>Are you spending too much time on low priority issues?</div>	<div>Box 4</div> <div>LEAST CRITICAL ISSUES</div> <div>Can you accept or forget about these issues?</div>

COUPLE DISCUSSION

- Select one issue from Box 1 that you will work on together as a couple.
- Work together as a team to achieve your goals.
 - Communicate about the issue.
 - Use good conflict resolution skills.
 - Be flexible with one another.





CONFLICT RESOLUTION

"Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not easy." —Aristotle

TEN STEPS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

All couples have differences and disagreements. Studies show the amount of disagreements are not related to marital happiness as much as how they are handled. Happy couples do not avoid disagreements; they resolve them while remaining respectful of each other, thereby strengthening their relationship. This Ten Step Model is a simple, but effective way to resolve conflict while avoiding the common and destructive patterns. Use this model with an ongoing issue in your relationship, as well as future issues.

1. **Set a time and place for discussion.**

2. **Define the problem.** Be specific. _____

3. **List the ways you each contribute to the problem.**

Partner 1: _____

Partner 2: _____

4. **List past attempts to resolve the issue that were not successful.**

1) _____ 3) _____

2) _____ 4) _____

5. **Brainstorm 10 possible solutions to the problem.** Do not judge or criticize any of the suggestions at this point.

1) _____ 6) _____

2) _____ 7) _____

3) _____ 8) _____

4) _____ 9) _____

5) _____ 10) _____

6. **Discuss and evaluate each of these possible solutions.** Be as objective as possible. Talk about how useful and appropriate each suggestion feels for resolving your issue.

7. **Agree on one solution to try:** _____

8. **Agree how you will each work toward this solution.** Be as specific as possible.

Partner 1: _____

Partner 2: _____

9. **Set up another meeting to discuss your progress.**

Place: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

10. **Reward each other for progress.** If you notice your partner making a positive contribution toward the solution, praise his/her effort.



FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

"Money is a terrible master but an excellent servant." --P.T. Barnum

IMPORTANCE OF FINANCIAL GOALS

Couples argue about finances more than any other topic. Regardless of how much or how little money a couple has, deciding what to purchase and how to spend their money is problematic for most couples.

Typically, most couples focus on only short-term financial goals like: "Today I will pay \$100 on my credit card bill." But short-term goals should also take into consideration your long-term goals like: "We want to save enough to make a down payment on a house."

One way to reduce the amount of conflict regarding finances is for you and your partner to discuss and decide on your short-term and long-term financial goals. Setting common goals as a couple can increase your sense of teamwork and collaboration in this complex area of finances.

Identifying and Deciding on Your Financial Goals

Each person should individually brainstorm their short-term and long-term financial goals and then share them with each other. Short-term goals should be what you can achieve in six months to one year. Long term goals might be achieved from one to five years. Remember, your goals should be realistic, clear and specific.

Short-Term Goals (six months to one year)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Long-Term Goals (one to five years)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

COUPLE DISCUSSION

- Share your lists with one another.
- What do they have in common? Where are they different?
- Decide together as a couple on your common goals.
- Talk about how you can each contribute to achieving these goals.
- Revisit them from time to time so you stay on track.





LEISURE ACTIVITIES

*"Just play. Have fun. Enjoy the game."
—Michael Jordan*

THE DATING EXERCISE

If you want to keep your relationship alive and growing, our best advice is to date your mate! Dating will help you maintain a friendship—one of the best indicators of a successful, long-term marriage. The habit of dating is the catalyst for building your couple friendship and staying emotionally connected through the coming years. This exercise will help you establish, reestablish, or reinforce the dating habit.

1. Separately write down your answers to the following questions.

- As you think about the life of your relationship, what have been your most favorite dates?
- What do you enjoy doing together? (sports, hobbies, interests, and recreational activities)
- What are some things you would like to learn or pursue together? (e.g. sports, cooking, hiking)

2. Share your answers with each other and brainstorm a combined list of potential dates.

3. Evaluate your combined list and rank the order in which to do them. Use the criteria below to evaluate your dates. If your budget is tight, think creatively! You may want to recreate a favorite date when you made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and had a picnic in the park.

- Time required (for instance, 1 hour, 2 hours, evening, afternoon, morning or whole day)
- Financial resources needed for date (\$ = inexpensive, \$\$ = moderate, \$\$\$ = expensive)
- Energy level (low energy, medium energy, high energy)

4. Now pull out your calendars and write in one date a week for the next two months. It takes three weeks to make a new habit (or relearn an old one) and six weeks to feel good about it. Date your partner once a week for the next two months and you will be well on your way to energizing your relationship with fun, romance and laughter!



SEX AND AFFECTION

"Affection is responsible for nine-tenths of whatever solid and durable happiness there is in our lives." —C. S. Lewis

THE EXPRESSION OF INTIMACY

Emotional intimacy and physical intimacy are closely related. Couples who have a good emotional relationship and feel loved and appreciated have the best physical relationship.

Affection is, to a large degree, a learned skill. Even those who seem to be "naturals" in this area usually had some training in their childhood as they saw and experienced the expressions of affection modeled around them. Those for whom affection seems awkward may have come from a home where affection was absent or rarely expressed. Either way, it's important to discuss your upbringing and how it has affected your expectations in this area.

COUPLE DISCUSSION

The following questions were designed using the definition of affection as "any verbal or nonverbal expression that communicates love in a non-sexual way."



- What does "affection" mean to you?
- How much affection was there in your families growing up (verbal and nonverbal)?
- How did you respond to the affection (or lack of affection) you received?
- How did your father show affection?
- How did your mother show affection?
- On a scale of 1–10, how much affection do you want in your marriage? (1—very little, 10—great amount)

For Premarital Couples

- What was the attitude toward sex in your family? Was it talked about?
- Where did you learn about sex?
- Have you fully disclosed your sexual history to your partner? If not, why not?
- Has lack of affection or sexual dissatisfaction ever been a factor for you in the breakup of a relationship?
- Discuss your views on pornography.
- Have you discussed family planning?

For Married Couples

- What do you need in order to be in the mood for sex?
- Do you feel comfortable initiating sex? Why or why not?
- How often would you prefer or expect sex?
- What sexual activities do you enjoy most?
- Are there specific sexual acts that make you uncomfortable?
- How could you each contribute to making your sexual relationship more satisfying?



MARRIAGE EXPECTATIONS

"Every disappointment involves an unmet expectation."

MANAGING YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Expectations about love and marriage have a powerful impact on relationships. To a large degree, you will be disappointed or happy in life based on how well what is happening matches up with what you think should be happening. All married couples start out hoping for and believing they will experience the very best. Problems arise when these hopes and beliefs are not based on reality.

The following statements are *common fantasies* couples have about marriage. Read them and select the ones you believe are true. Take turns sharing and discussing these with each other.

1. My partner will meet all my needs for companionship.
2. Time will resolve our problems.
3. If I have to ask, it is not as meaningful.
4. We should live 'happily ever after' with no major problems.
5. Keeping secrets about my past or present is acceptable if it would only cause pain for my partner.
6. Less romance means we have less love for one another.
7. Our relationship will remain the same.
8. My partner's interest in sex will be the same as mine.
9. Our relationship will be better when we have a baby.
10. We will do things just like my family did.
11. Nothing could cause us to question our love for one another.
12. I believe I know everything there is to know about my partner.
13. Love is all you need for a great marriage.
14. It is better to keep silent about something bothering me than to cause unnecessary problems in our relationship.

COUPLE DISCUSSION

- Which of these statements have you been tempted to believe?
- If you agree with these statements, how might they set you up for being disappointed later on?
- How does believing or living out these statements keep you from fully loving and/or honoring yourself and your partner?





GOALS

"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success." —Henry Ford

ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS...TOGETHER

Clarify and define your personal, couple, and family goals for the next few years. Then share them with your partner. Remember your goals should be realistic and clearly stated.

Partner 1 Goals

Personal Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Couple Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Family Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Partner 2 Goals

Personal Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Couple Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Family Goals

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

COUPLE DISCUSSION

- Were you surprised by any of your partner's goals?
- Which goals are most important to you right now?
- What are the current issues surrounding these goals?
- How do your partner's goals complement or compete with yours?
- How can you each contribute to achieving these goals?
- What will be the first step to make this goal become a reality?

