

Communication 101:

25 Ways to Communicate Effectively with the People in your Life

1. Take some time to think about what you'd like to talk about.

Allowing yourself to formulate exactly what it is you want to talk about, how you feel about it and why it is important to you will make you more effective in communicating. You'll feel more confident when you approach the discussion and be better able to speak calmly which will allow the other person to more easily listen to what you have to say.

2. Invite the other person to talk with you.

We all respond better to an invitation to discuss something (especially if it is emotional or difficult) than we do to someone demanding our time. You want the other person to be open to what you have to say and setting the stage with an invitation is an important way to do just that. You are showing him or her respect for their time and allowing them to feel more open to the discussion rather than feeling blindsided by your urgent need to talk.

3. Make an appointment for this discussion.

Making an appointment to talk might feel artificial. However, it will ultimately allow each of you to know when and where you will talk and trust that it will actually happen. Deciding on a specific time to talk will also allow you to be more prepared for the discussion. You might want to tell the other person the topic that you want to address so that he or she can think about his or her feelings about it before the two of you meet.

4. Find a time when you are both not distracted or stressed.

Determine when it is best for each of you to talk. It is not effective to spring an issue on someone as they are walking out the door or when either of you is tired at the end of a busy day. When you make an appointment it is important for each of you to agree to a time when you can both focus on the discussion. You don't want to be stressed or distracted by work, children or other pressing issues.

5. Find a neutral place to talk.

Ideally you should go someplace outside your home, where you can talk quietly. A neutral place allows you to each feel that you are on the same level and not like one person is in a dominant position. Try to find a place that feels safe such as a

park or a quiet restaurant or café and doesn't offer distractions that will derail the conversation.

6. Create ground rules for how you each aspire to be during the discussion.

When having a conversation remember that there is to be no interrupting, name calling, or reacting with anger (even if you are frustrated!). Cell phones should be turned off and put away so that neither of you is distracted by them. If each of you knows that there are rules for your behavior it will create a feeling of safety. It is difficult to approach someone with a topic of conversation or receive someone's issue if the environment is perceived as hostile. Talking about ground rules beforehand allows each of you to create the setting that will allow for effective communication.

7. Talk so that the other person can listen.

Speaking in a calm voice and being careful not to load your discussion with accusations will allow them to pay attention and take in fully what you are trying to say. Be careful not to blame, be sarcastic, or act in an aggressive manner. Treating the other person with respect will create the space for a discussion rather than an argument.

8. Use "I" statements.

Beginning what you are saying with "I" helps you remember to speak from your own viewpoint and shifts the conversation away from blame. When you use "I" statements it will be easier for your partner to listen and not immediately go on the defense. The most effective way to communicate is to speak about what you feel and what your understanding of the situation is and to allow the other person to ask questions to better understand why this issue is important to you.

9. Be respectful of each other.

Name calling or screaming will shut down the discussion and cause things to spiral out of control. Creating an atmosphere of respect and goodwill goes a long way in supporting effective communication. By remembering to not interrupt and saying thank you, the other person will be more willing to listen to what you have to say. We are all more prone to stay engaged with someone when we feel respected and not like the enemy.

10. Come to the meeting with notes

When you are sitting down to talk about an issue (especially a difficult one) it is helpful to plan ahead and jot down the points that you want to make. If you get flustered or nervous it can be difficult to remember all that you want to say.

Even the most experienced public speaker will bring notes with them to the podium so that they can address all of their issues and make a strong presentation.

11. Agree to the amount of time that each of you will speak.

Just as in political debates each individual is given a certain amount of time to define their thoughts and position before others can respond, it is important that each person feels free to express his or her feelings before the other person answers. Although it may feel artificial, you might use a timer to keep track of the time (give a 1-2 minute warning). This will allow each of you to relax while you are speaking because you know that you will not be interrupted.

12. Practice listening to what the other is saying and not rehearsing what you are going to say in response.

We all have a natural inclination to plan a response while we are listening in a difficult discussion. Truly listening will allow you to respond in a way that allows the other person to feel that you care about them and the relationship and will help to keep the conversation from escalating out of control. Remember that you will have the opportunity to ask questions and to speak about what is important to you once the speaker has finished and it is your turn.

13. Practice asking questions rather than making accusations.

Adopting a feeling of curiosity about what the other person is feeling and saying will help you to listen more effectively. You will learn about them and open the lines of communication rather than closing them down with defensive remarks.

14. Keep a notepad beside you during the discussion.

In the spirit of listening and not interrupting to make your point, having a pen and paper with you will allow you to jot down thoughts and important points that you will be able to make after your partner has had an opportunity to tell his or her story.

15. Keep the discussion focused on the present issue.

It can be challenging to stay grounded in the present and not allow your mind to wander. Staying focused on the discussion will allow you to move more quickly toward a successful resolution that works for each of you. Working hard not to bring up issues from the past or concerns about the future allows you both to focus on the issue at hand. Talking about things in the past and worries about the future are certainly important to talk about. However, bringing everything to the table at one time will overwhelm you both and will likely lead to an argument.

16. Ask the other person what his or her intention is because it may not match your perception of what is being said.

Asking questions to help you understand what is truly being said and what the underlying intentions are may give you information that is different from the perception that you automatically had about what you heard. Checking in about the intention can sidestep a misunderstanding that might lead to an argument and hurt feelings.

17. Repeat back what has been said so that it is clear that you understand.

Despite the fact that it will feel awkward to say, "What I heard you say was..." this will go a long way to stop a misunderstanding and misperception before it grows too big to manage. When you take the time to repeat back what you heard you might discover that you misheard what was said or saw things through a filter that changed the meaning. These misunderstandings could potentially have sent the discussion off track and into an argument.

18. Ask questions to clarify exactly what the other person wants to tell you.

It is tempting to assume that because you each speak the same language that you understand what your partner has said. Asking questions to gain clarity is a tool that will reinforce the strong bond that you are both working to create. You are showing respect and curiosity for his or her concerns and point of view. You don't necessarily have to agree with what is being said, but you do need to fully understand it in order to communicate effectively what you feel.

19. Take some time apart if either of you begins to get upset or overwhelmed.

It is not unusual or wrong to get overwhelmed when you are discussing something that may be challenging. The act of communicating is a skill that takes practice and requires patience to master. Taking a time out to calm yourself and to think through what has been said by each of you will go a long way in stopping the conversation from spiraling out of control. We are all more effective when we approach someone with a calm attitude. If you call for a timeout let the other person know how long you will need and then be responsible to circle back to them to reconvene the discussion. If you need more time you can say this but remember to come back together to talk when you feel ready.

20. Remember what brought the two of you together.

When you are not feeling fully connected to your partner or are feeling upset or angry it is valuable to take a moment to remember the person that you fell in

love with. It is normal over the course of a relationship for people to fall into patterns that may feel hum drum and not very romantic. Allow yourself to look at photos of your courtship or marriage and remember the dreams that you had and the person that you were enchanted with. Even though you may not be feeling this way now, refreshing your memory will help you to push forward through the difficult times. You will then emerge on the other end in a stronger, healthier relationship.

21. Discuss things away from other people.

Having a discussion that is difficult or relates to adult issues is not appropriate to have in front of children or other people. Discussing things when alone will allow each of you to focus on the issue and pay full attention to what is being said and how you are reacting. Finding private time away from others is a powerful tool for strengthening the bond and building a strong ability to communicate effectively.

22. Find a solution to problems that feels acceptable to both of you.

Compromise is part of being in a relationship. Keep the discussion open as you brainstorm ideas and try to find solutions that take into account what you each feel and need. You may need to meet several times (taking time between discussions to think about what the other person has said and how you feel) in order to reach an agreement that works for each of you. Set a timeframe to live with the solution and then check back in with each other to see how it is working for each of you. Adjustments can be discussed at that time if necessary.

23. Learn how to agree to disagree.

Despite the fact that you may feel you want to convince the other person of your point of view, it is more effective to realize that you can each have a different vision of an issue and that you don't have to agree in order to have a good relationship. A healthy relationship has give and take, with each person getting some of what he or she wants as well as allowing the other person to get some of his or her wants met.

24. Set a date each week for a check in with each other.

It is very helpful for people to set up time before the weekend or upcoming week to discuss plans and expectations that they each have for the days ahead. Checking in to see what has been accomplished and what needs to be taken care of during the week or the following weekend is useful. Taking the time on Sunday evening to discuss the logistics for the week (who is picking up the children, what nights you will be home late from work, travel schedules etc.) all create a strong foundation of communication within a relationship.

25. Take time to be together away from the “business” of daily life

When people first meet they spent time having fun and learning about each other. Guess what? That doesn't need to stop just because you have more complicated lives or have been together for many, many years.

Relaxing, stress-free time is just as important to the health of a relationship after many years as it is in the very beginning. Time together can be simple affairs - a picnic in the park or a walk at the beach, a cup of coffee at a café or quiet restaurant. You don't need to feel pressure to create a lavish time to impress the other person; this is about spending some quality time together without the distraction of everyday life and the issues that may be weighting down the relationship.