

Couple Relationships: Communication and Conflict Resolution

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Understanding gender differences in communication can help us to have more meaningful communication with our spouse or partner. This awareness can also lead to more satisfying resolutions when conflict occurs.



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WE OFTEN THINK THAT WOMEN TALK MORE THAN men, but in reality they talk about the same amount. It is the type of talk that differs. Men typically talk about work, sports, or problem-solving topics, while women tend to focus more on emotions and developing connections with others through talking.

Women and men also differ in how they talk to a friend. In a study by Dr. Deborah Tannen, same-sex pairs of preschoolers, school age children, and teenagers were asked to enter a room with two chairs and have a conversation with their friend. The conversations were videotaped and without using the audio, differences were found. The girls arranged the chairs so that they were sitting facing one another and leaned in to talk to their friend. The boys had a tendency to set the chairs side by side and not look directly at their friend when talking. Boys were also more fidgety. In this study girls showed signs of more interest in emotional connection. These differences were found for all of the age groups.

When Dr. Tannen included the audio, the conversations were different. Boys usually tried to “one up” the other on an activity. For example one boy might say, “I went hunting with my Dad and we walked one mile.” The next boy would say, “I went hunting with my Dad and we walked five miles.” And yet another boy would say, “I went hunting with my Dad and we walked clear to the other side of the mountains.”

Girls, on the other hand, want to have the same thing or feeling as their friend. For example one girl might say, “My Mom bought me a new shirt.” The other girl might say, “My Mom bought me a new shirt too and it’s blue!” Then the first girl might reply, “Blue? Mine has blue on it too!” Dr. Tanner suggests that this shows that girls tend to be more concerned about emotional connection, while boys are more concerned about being the top “guy.”

Nonverbal Communication

Over 90 percent of our communication is non-verbal, and it provides a great deal of information about what words we are trying to get across. Non-verbal communication includes our body language, facial expressions, the tone of our voice, and rate of our speech.

Nonverbal communication:

- **Provides information about the speaker’s mood.** Universally we know that a smile means someone is happy while a frown can mean the opposite.
- **Regulates the interaction.** If the speaker appears rushed the recipient can expect a brief conversation. If the speaker crosses her arms and stands over the recipient then he may believe the speaker is not happy.
- **Defines the relationship.** Typically, the communication with a spouse or partner is more intimate than with casual acquaintances. We sit closer to our loved one and more touch is involved than what we would experience with an acquaintance.

Our body language, facial expression, and the tone of our conversation says more than the actual words. Research suggests that women are better at being aware of and acting on nonverbal communication than are men.

While there are gender differences in communication, the differences have more to do with gender roles than gender. Women in powerful positions may not be as concerned with nonverbal cues. Some men are more sensitive than others and will pay more attention to nonverbal cues.

One problem with being too focused on nonverbal communication is jumping to conclusions. For example, if a young girl sees her father with a frown on his face, she may think that she is in trouble before he has a chance to speak. He may have been thinking about something else.

Assess Your Own Nonverbal Communication

When I am talking to others I:	Yes	No	I need to work on this
Look directly at the person to show interest.			
Avoid crossing my arms across my chest so that I communicate a willingness to listen.			
Stand or sit at the same level with the person.			
Smile or nod my head to show interest.			
Try to look relaxed so the other person will relax.			
Use a friendly tone of voice.			

For every “no” answer you gave, consider how you might change your nonverbal communication to be more positive. Check those behaviors you would like to work on changing. Revisit your list in three months to assess whether or not you have made changes.

Conversation Topics

There are also gender differences in what we say. Women talk more about their feelings and concerns while men stick to more impersonal topics. Women speak more hesitantly. They often end with question to gain approval. For example: “It’s hot today, isn’t it?” Men are more likely to be direct such as “It’s hot today.”

In general, women share more with friends than do men. They also spend more time in conversations focusing on the relationship. Men share more with their spouses or partners rather than with other men. Women tend to be more expressive in their talk. Men are more matter of fact and want to make a statement to get something done. This can cause a breakdown in communication between men and women. Men want to take action while women seek to make sure the other person’s feelings and thoughts have been expressed before taking action.

Remember that when a woman asks a question, she is often trying to connect with her spouse or partner. For example, “What do you want to do about dinner tonight,” means more than, “What is for dinner.” She may be trying to see if he wants to eat out.

Men on the other hand would be more likely to say, “Let’s go to a movie tonight,” being more direct in what they want. A woman hearing this statement may feel that she hasn’t been consulted about the couple’s plans for the evening.

Understanding that men and women in general have different styles of communication can help men and women better understand one another. Men need to remember that women often want to connect with the other person when talking and women need to recognize that men may be more direct.

Resolving Conflicts

All couples have conflict at some time. This is because we have a strong emotional connection with those we love. Conflict is not bad if the couple works through the problem and are respectful of one another in communication and action.

Men and women respond to conflict in different ways. Men are more likely than women to withdraw from conflict. They withdraw more when women try to get them to talk about the problem. Women are more direct than men and want to address the conflict. This may be related to women’s tendency to be concerned with the emotional aspect of the relationship. Women are also more critical in addressing conflict.

When couples are unhappy, resolving conflict is more difficult. Unhappy couples often have miscommunication. Here are some things that cause miscommunication:

- **Not focusing on the problem that we need to address.** Some people try to change the subject so that they don’t have to focus on the problem. Others may try and bring in all of the problems the couple ever had to avoid the original issue.
- **Not listening to our spouse or partner causes problems.** Interrupting your spouse or partner is one way to tell the person you are not listening.
- **Assuming our spouse or partner can read our mind.** We can’t read minds. The other person will not know how we feel unless we let him or her know.
- **Finding fault** with everything our spouse or partner brings up as a solution is not helpful. This is called “yes, butting” where one person can’t find anything to agree on.

- **Competing with your spouse** to try and make your problem seem worse does not help when there is conflict. This does not help when trying to solve a problem.
- **Displaying a negative attitude** does not help when there is conflict. This includes:
 - Mocking or insulting the other person
 - Being defensive
 - Withdrawing from the conversation
 - Being aggressive or belligerent

Conflicts need to be resolved. Those that aren't will "simmer" between partners and eventually boil over into a larger problem. Resolving conflicts can be done in a constructive way. Some good strategies to use when there is a conflict include:

- **Using active listening skills.**
 - "I" statements are less offensive to the other person. For example instead of saying, "You never spend time at home with me," say, "I would like to spend more time with you. I get lonesome when you are gone so much. Can we think of a way to be together more often?"
 - Acknowledge the other person's feelings. For example, "You sound upset."
 - Check to make sure what you heard is what the other person is saying. For example, "Am I hearing you correctly, that you would like to find a different job?" The other person then has the chance to clarify if needed.

- Focus on the topic of the conflict. Don't bring in other problems.
- **Saying what we mean** – being clear in our messages and asking the other person what they heard.
- **Being polite and staying cool** – if the situation is too tense, take a break and come back to the issue later. Be sure to set a specific time when the issue will be revisited otherwise it may be left unresolved. Allow at least a few hours to pass before revisiting the issue. For example, "I need to think about this, let's talk about it after dinner."
- **Offering respect and validation** – even if the couple disagrees. Being respectful and validating one another's feelings is important in a relationship.
- **Asking yourself whether or not the issue is important enough for a conflict.** Sometimes we argue over small issues that can be resolved by agreeing to disagree.

Rules for Conflict

Most of the rules in our families and relationships are unwritten. We are socialized to know family rules from the time we are born. Couples develop rules for their relationship as they spend time with one another. However, having clear rules for handling conflict is important. Talk over the rules before a conflict occurs. Your rules might include:

- No shouting at one another
- No swearing

With your spouse or partner, write down the rules for conflict that you want for your relationship.

When we have disagreements with each other we will follow these rules:

Your initials:

Your spouse or partners initials:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

- Allowing you or your partner to “cool off” before discussing the problem
- No going to bed mad at each other
- No putting one another down
- Sticking to the current problem and not bringing in other issues

With your spouse or partner, you may want to write down the rules for conflict that you want for your relationship.

Try using the strategies you read in this guide the next time you and your spouse or partner have a disagreement. Some of the ideas such as “I” statements may feel awkward at first. Keep practicing and they will become more natural to you. Remember that conflict happens in all relationships, it is how the conflict is handled that is the key.

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