

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Open, honest communication should form the basis of every healthy relationship, whether it's a working relationship or a personal one.

Most of the time, breakdowns in communication happen when people fear what another person might say, and so an important conversation is avoided or delayed. Raising an issue with someone can be difficult, and hearing 'we need to talk' from someone can set off all sorts of fear and anxiety.

Here are some tips for more effective communication techniques that can make it easier to start a conversation you've been trying to avoid.

1. Plan and prepare for it

When you know you will need to have a difficult conversation, it can be helpful to plan for it in advance and go through what you want to say.

Prepare for it like you would a job interview or if you had to give a speech publicly.

Getting ready by giving it some prior thought makes it easier to get your point across clearly.

Suggest to the person you wish to speak to that they set aside time to have a discussion with you about something important.

Extending them this courtesy shows that you don't want to blindside them and gives them a chance to prepare themselves as well.

2. Be clear about the issue

You might be upset and finding it difficult to articulate what is going on for you, but it's important to be specific and clear about what is making you feel that way.

If there are a bunch of things on your mind, focus on one or two of the biggest issues and see what progress you can make on these with the other person.

Cooperating and negotiating on these more important issues will replenish the goodwill between you both and the other issues may become more manageable.

It can help to write the issues down.

3. Think about timing

Having the conversations at a time and place where there are no distractions will help keep you focussed, but choose somewhere you are both comfortable.

When giving the other person the heads up that you want to talk, use language that invites them in and which doesn't make them feel unnecessarily anxious about what it is you want to discuss with them.

Give them an idea about what you want to talk about without getting bogged down in the detail straight away. Remember, you're giving them a heads up, not blindsiding them.

For example, "I'd really like us to spend some time talking about what has been going on for me lately. When would be a good time for us to sit down?"

Using 'us' and 'we' language is important, and shows that you want to work together with the other person.



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4. Having the conversation

• Now that the time has come to have the conversation, **make sure you're still in the right frame of mind for what could be a difficult chat.**

• **If you're angry or exhausted when the time comes around, consider putting it off** until later in the day or week so you're in a better headspace for it. But don't put it off too long, or things will fester again.

• **Bottling up emotions, and eventually letting them spill over, can damage a relationship beyond repair**, so remember that there is always a right way and a wrong way to express your feelings without the choice of words or your method of expression becoming the main problem.

• **Remember that being nervous under these circumstances is perfectly normal**, but with the preparation and planning you did earlier you will be in the best position for a tough conversation.

• **Starting with your genuine good intentions sets the aspiration and tone for the tough conversation.** Make sure the other person understands that you come with a spirit of goodwill and a desire for growth and positive change.

• **Using the right language and listening skills are the two most important things when having a tough conversation.** You want to get your point across but it has to be done in a way the other person is able to hear, and you also need to listen to what the other person has to say. Their response and their emotions are just as valid as yours.

• **Remember that tone and body language are just as important as the words you choose.**

• It's good to start with some "I" statements about your feelings or your experience. Something like, "I am feeling frustrated" or "I am wondering". This way it is less of an attack.

• **Try to avoid "You" statements, like "You do this..." or "You're need to stop doing..."**

• While each relationship, whether it's a personal one, professional, or romantic, is different, and so has its own pattern of language, you can try some variations on the following suggestions:

- *"How have you been going? How do you feel we're managing our communication and our relationship?"*

- *"I really want to see if we can get past some of the difficulties we've been having and try to talk about things differently."*

- *"I want us to be more open with one another but I feel like there are some things getting in the way of that for us"*

• **It's important for you both to have an equal opportunity to express your views and feelings.** Even if you were the one to get the conversation started, you might find that the other person has a lot on their mind and has been holding on to similar feelings. This is their chance to express their feelings and opinions to you in a safe and constructive way as well.

• **Try Reflective Listening.** It can feel artificial or contrived, but it's a good way of making sure both people are on the same page as the conversation progresses. Repeat back what you've heard your partner say:

- *"What I'm hearing is that you feel..."*

- *"I understand what you're going through with..."*

- *"Now that I know that you're experiencing..."*

• **A pen and paper can be useful for taking notes** and staying on track through the conversation, but only do this in a way that isn't confrontational.

• **Don't feel like you have to resolve every problem all at once**, but every tough conversation needs to have a clear outcome that both parties can agree t. This can be as simple as "We can't make a decision right now but we will agree to keep working on it together."



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5. Tips for Communication at Home

• **Open, honest communication should be at the heart of every loving relationship.** Use some of the guidelines below to re-open the lines of communication between you and your partner. If you're in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, be careful using some or all of these tips. You know your relationship best; if these tips might put you in danger, don't try them.

• **Find the right time and the right place.** Not only is it important to make sure neither of you are distracted, it might also be important to have a tough conversation away from the house, at a neutral location and away from your children. You also need to find a time during the day or week when you're both calm and have the physical and emotional energy for a difficult conversation.

• **Talk face to face.** Avoid discussing important or significant issues by text message or emails. The meaning, tone and intention of written language can sometimes be misunderstood. Sarcasm and humour seldom translate into the written word. Talk face to face so that all of the verbal and non-verbal communication styles which you or your partner use can be conveyed. If you have difficulty articulating your thoughts and find writing them down is helpful, prepare a page of notes and read them out to your partner in-person.

• **Don't attack.** Even when we mean well we can sometimes sound harsh or aggressive simply because of our choice of words. Using "you" can sound aggressive or seem like you think the other person is wholly to blame. This will put them on the defensive from the outset. Try to use "we" and "us" language that is inclusive and cooperative.

• **Be honest** Sometimes the truth hurts, but it's important for you both to agree to be honest. This is the key to a healthy relationship. Admit that you aren't always perfect and apologise for your mistakes instead of making excuses. You will feel better and it will strengthen your relationship.

• **Pay attention to your body language.** Ensure your partner really knows you're listening to them by showing them through your body language. Give them your full attention. Sit up, face them and make eye contact. Don't take a phone call or check alerts on your phone. Leave it on silent in another room if you have to. Show your partner that you respect them by listening and responding to them, and not something or someone else.

• **Use the 48 Hour rule** If your partner does something that makes you angry, you need to tell them about it, but you don't need to do it right away. They aren't mind readers though, so don't let it sit for too long. If you're still hurt or upset by something 48 hours later, tell them about it. If after 48 hours it doesn't seem like such a big deal, consider letting it go.

Give yourself this period of time to reflect on the incident and ensure the heat is taken out of the discussion. It's a good opportunity for you to put the incident in perspective before you talk about it.

Once you mention and discuss your feelings, if your partner sincerely apologises you will be in a good place to let it go.

Try not to bring up random past issues though too far down the track if they're not relevant.

• **What if you're very angry?** It's okay to get angry from time to time in a relationship - everyone does at one point or another. What's important is that you resolve conflicts in a healthy and constructive way.

- **Stop.** Take a step back and breathe. Take a break from the conversation or disagreement.

- **Think.** After you're no longer upset, think about why you got so angry. Figure out the problem and then think about how best to articulate your feelings.

- **Talk.** Finally, talk again with your partner, and when you do, use the tips above.

- **Listen.** After you've told your partner how you feel, remember to stop talking and listen to what they have to say.

