

# Quick Guide to Positive Communication for Couples

## General Guidelines for conflict resolution

- **Your job is to express your needs and wishes appropriately while considering the needs, wishes, and rights of others.**
- Make a time and place for clear communication.
- Remove distractions such as cell phones and TV.
- Discuss one problem at a time.
- Avoid interrupting one another.
- Avoid negative mind-reading, i.e. take each other at your word.
- **Take a pause.** If you become angry or upset, state calmly that you need to take a break and set a time to discuss later.

## Expressing your needs and wishes

- **Your job is to express your needs and feelings while still caring for those of your partner. Keep in mind your goal for the conversation and the goal for your relationship.**
- Make honest "I" statements.
- Do not use character traits or adjectives to describe the other person.
- Stick to describing YOUR FEELINGS and the other person's BEHAVIOR.
- Do not use the words "always" or "never".
- **Ban negativity.** Negativity destroys the trust and safety needed for communication. State your points without blaming, sulking, attacking, complaining, criticizing or anything else that feels negative to the other person. Negativity is a wish in disguise. Ask instead for specific changes (see below).
- Rather than expressing anger, express the hurt, sadness or disappointment behind the anger.
- Try something like: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because I thought your behavior meant \_\_\_\_\_".
  - Or "When you do X in situation Y, I feel Z."
- **Show appreciation.** Reward the other person for their effort. "I appreciate you listening and making an effort to understand how I feel."

## Setting a boundary or asking for a change:

If you are unhappy with someone else's behavior, you can:

- 1) choose what you are willing to accept
- 2) ask for a change
- 3) set a limit on what you are willing to do or no longer do
- 4) remove yourself by leaving a situation, a particular conversation, or even a relationship

If you decide to ask for a change, here are 3 steps to follow:

- 1) Empathize with the other person
- 2) Ask for a change in behavior or state your limit
- 3) Offer positive reinforcement by appreciating their effort or understanding. "I understand that you feel..., I'd really like it if you.... OR I am no longer going to.... Thank you so much for understanding and making an effort. I really appreciate it."

Some tips and pointers:

- Only make one request at a time.
- Do not include complaints or anything the other person feels as negativity.
- Instead of asking for change in a quality or personality, ask for a specific change in behavior in a specific situation.
- Offer a few options to choose from, if possible.
- Start with a 10% change, if needed.
- Negotiate either change or acceptance of what you can gracefully live with.
- Express specifically what you want to see **more** of rather than negative behaviors you want to see less of. EX: "I'd like it if you \_\_\_\_\_ every day [or whenever we \_\_\_\_\_] because it would help me feel more/less \_\_\_\_\_"
- **Show appreciation.** Notice and appreciate each time he or she does 10% of a behavior you have requested without adding critical commentary. "Thank you for doing \_\_\_\_\_. It means a lot to me."
- If the other person is unwilling to change, you can choose what you are willing to accept, change how you respond to their behavior, or remove yourself from the situation.

## **Breaking the Argument Cycle: Stop to listen**

- **People will often keep repeating their argument over and over again until they truly feel you have heard and understood them. Your job is to let them feel heard by being a safe space for the other person while trying to understand his or her perspective.**
- Listen with an attitude of curiosity without judgment. Do not argue back.
- Listen without interruption, with an intention to accurately remember what was said rather than to refute it.
- Summarize what you understand without trying to defend yourself or adding any of your own thoughts. Ask “Do I have that right?”
- Ask “Is there more?” with genuine interest and curiosity.
- Continue summarizing until the Speaker is done.
- Communicate that you understand how the Speaker could feel that way “I understand how you could feel \_\_\_\_\_ (sad, happy, mad, worried, disappointed)”. You're not saying that you agree or that the person is right or wrong, simply that if you were in the other person’s shoes with all of his or her assumptions, it would be reasonable to feel that way. If you're having trouble, ask "Can you help me see things from your perspective?"
- Ask, “What can I do to help you or make this better?”
- Follow through and do whatever you agree on.

## **Focus on Appreciation**

- Focus on appreciation. Appreciation is the antidote to resentment. This is perhaps the most important thing you can do for your relationships. Showing someone appreciation every day will:
  - Create more positive interactions
  - Change your own perspective by focusing on what the other person does right
  - Reinforce new behaviors
  - Create motivation in each person to do more
  - Create validation rather than feelings of being taken for granted
- Look for what someone else does right and immediately appreciate him or her for it without adding any critical commentary.
- Try to find at least 3 things each day someone else does that you appreciate, and tell them thank you