

How to Effectively Communicate with your Partner

Expressing Feelings

Expressing your feelings involves more than just giving a one-word answer when asked “how do you feel about _____?” To more effectively relate to your partner, you must first learn to properly *identifying* your feelings and *expand* your definition of the feeling:

You can start to IDENTIFY your feelings by asking yourself the following questions:

- Is my feeling good or bad?
- What is the location, size, shape, and color of the feeling?
- What does it say?
- What do I want to do?
- What past experience does this feeling remind me of?
- If I were to name this feeling, what would it be?

Now that you have identified your feeling, you must be able to EXPAND your definition to help your partner see it as you do.

1. **Use Descriptors:** Each one of us has a unique understanding of a feeling word. For example, when Joan says she is ‘upset’ she means worried and frightened, yet when Joe says he is ‘upset’ he means he is angry and irritated.
2. **Describe Intensity:** Try using descriptor words such as little, slight, mild, extreme, etc.
3. **Get Specific:** Oftentimes in arguments couples will over-generalize their feelings such as “I have always felt alone in this relationship.” Before making such a statement, assess the duration of your feeling. For example you may choose to say “..since last week” or “...when you did not invite me to the party.”
4. **Give Context:** Avoid describing your partner as the “cause” of your feelings. When do this, your partner is more likely to become defensive, and thus it will be difficult to problem-solve together. Choose your words carefully and describe the *context* of your feeling without directly ascribing blame or causation. Example: “You make me so angry!” versus “I am angry that you did not wash the dishes.”
5. **Provide History:** It is often helpful to share with your partner what this feeling reminds you of. We may find ourselves reacting more or less strongly to a current situation because it serves as a “trigger” to previous events that have happened in our lives.

Feelings List

Affectionate	Furious	Put down
Afraid	Generous	Relaxed
Amused	Glad	Relieved
Angry	Gloomy	Resentful
Annoyed	Grateful	Resigned
Anxious	Great	Sad
Apprehensive	Guilty	Safe
Bitter	Happy	Satisfied
Bored	Hateful	Secure
Calm	Helpless	Sexy
Capable	Hopeless	Silly
Cheerful	Horrified	Strong
Comfortable	Hostile	Stubborn
Competent	Impatient	Stuck
Concerned	Inhibited	Supportive
Confident	Irritated	Sympathetic
Confused	Isolated	Tender
Contemptuous	Joyful	Terrified
Controlled	Lonely	Threatened
Curious	Loved	Thrilled
Defeated	Loving	Touchy
Dejected	Loyal	Trapped
Delighted	Melancholy	Troubled
Depressed	Miserable	Unappreciated
Desirable	Muddled	Uncertain
Despairing	Needy	Understood
Desperate	Nervous	Uneasy
Determined	Out of control	Unfulfilled
Devastated	Outraged	Unloved
Disappointed	Overwhelmed	Upset
Discouraged	Panicky	Uptight
Disgusted	Passionate	Used
Distrustful	Peaceful	Useless
Embarrassed	Pessimistic	Victimized
Enraged	Playful	Violated
Exasperated	Pleased	Vulnerable
Excited	Powerful	Wonderful
Fearful	Prejudiced	Worn out
Frantic	Pressured	Worried
Frustrated	Proud	Worthwhile
Fulfilled	Provoked	Yearning

Guidelines for Expressing your Feelings:

- (a) Use “I” Statements (b) Be Honest (c) Be Congruent with your Body Language

Blocks to Listening

There is a lot more to listening than merely being quiet while your partner talks. Real listening is distinguished by your *intention*. If your intention is to understand, enjoy, learn from, or help your partner, then you are really listening.

For many couples, real listening does not come easily. We may find ourselves falling victim to some of the many “blocks to listening” that are listed below.

- **Mind Reading.** You are mind reading when you disregard or distrust what your partner is actually saying and instead try to figure out what he or she “really means.” Mind readers give too much importance to subtle cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and posture. They ignore actual content of what their partner is saying in favor of their own assumptions and hunches.

Example:

Paul says to Peggy “I think you look good in both dresses – wear either one.” Peggy tells herself, “He really means I’m so skinny and flat-chested that I wouldn’t look good in anything.”

- **Rehearsing.** You’re so busy rehearsing what you’ll say next that you never really hear what your partner is telling you. Sometimes you may rehearse whole chains of dialogue: “I’ll say, then he will say, then I’ll say...”

Example:

Susie is telling Sebastian why he shouldn’t be the one who takes their son to his piano recital on Saturday, but Sebastian isn’t listening. He’s rehearsing his objection to the idea, because he wants to go to the ball game. He completely misses Susie’s deeper concerns about him spending more time with his son.

- **Filtering.** Filtering means that you listen to some things but not others. You may listen for signs that your partner is angry or sad or anxious and then tune out when you sense that your partner is okay and that you aren’t expected to respond to any emotional trouble. Filtering can also work to *exclude* things you don’t want to hear.

Example:

Your ears might work fine until your partner starts talking about your drinking, your mother-in-law, or moving out-of-state.

- **Judging.** Judging means that you have stopped listening to your partner because of some negative judgment, or that you only listen for the purpose of assigning blame and putting negative labels on your partner. You may have found yourself thinking of your partner in a certain way, and listen only to gather fresh evidence to confirm your existing beliefs.

Example:

Randy thought Kirk was an egomaniac, so he seldom listened when Kirk talked about himself. This negative judgment kept Randy from really getting to know Kirk for who he was.

- **Daydreaming.** Everyone's attention wanders from time to time. When you've been with someone for many years, it's especially easy to stop listening and drift away into your own fantasies. If you find it harder and harder to pay attention to your partner, it may be a danger sign that you are avoiding contact or certain topics.

Example:

Ralph spaced out nearly every time Gloria talked about her art class. He ultimately realized that he was resentful of the time she spent in class and was avoiding a confrontation by daydreaming.

- **Advising.** It is difficult to see our partners in pain, or grappling with a difficult problem. You may find yourself with an incredible urge to find the right solution for your partner, and to fix the problem. You may barely give your partner time to speak a complete sentence before you jump in with some advice. However, by doing this you are overlooking your partner's simple need to be heard.

Example:

When Margaret told Jan about her frustrations at work, Jan would say: "You need to get a new job! Get some career counseling!" Margaret felt even more overwhelmed by Jan's advice and really just wanted some sympathy.

- **Sparring.** Sometimes when discussions tend to involve conflict more times than not, you can find yourself getting into the habit of listening purely to disagree, argue, or debate. You take a position and defend it, regardless of what your partner says.

Example:

Whatever topic Joyce would bring up – the kids, money, relatives- Ted would meet her ideas with resistance without giving regard to any new suggestions she would have.