

Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

Being a Systemic Family Therapist I have a lot of tools in my toolkit for working with couples. However, I love to learn, so I have completed training in Gottman Method Couples Therapy. Such a great therapeutic framework for helping couples resolve conflict, build affection and create shared meaning together.

Gottman has identified four types of negative communication styles that are most common in relationship challenges.

This handout will teach you what the four negative styles are and provide you with practical strategies to eliminate them from your relationship.



Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

1. CRITICISM:

Criticism is an attack on the person's character and often leaves people feeling hurt, rejected, angry, or ashamed.

An example of criticism would be "You never think about my feelings. You are so selfish."

Conversations that start with negativity and criticism typically end with negativity and criticism. And the research shows that couples who start discussions in this way have a greater likelihood of divorce.

Challenging and uncomfortable conversations are not to be avoided, but how you engage in the conversation will either lead to a growing resentment or lead to a receptive and respectful dialogue.



Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

The Gottman Method teaches people to use a softer approach to the start of a challenging conversation. Your intention for the conversation is to raise a legitimate concern or disagreement without judging or blaming.

So how do you do it?

1. Watch your body language - no eye-rolling, crossed arms, and scowling expression.
2. Choose your words wisely - use "I" statements that share how you are feeling and what you are experiencing instead of "you" statements that typically involve blame or criticism.
3. Describe the situation or complaint from an objective position - state the facts and stay away from interpretations and blame.
4. Ask for what you need - stay away from expressing what you don't want to happen. What is your wish for the relationship?
5. Maintain appreciation and warmth - add positivity or politeness into the conversation.

For example, let's say that one of your frequent arguments is that your partner doesn't listen to you. You could try the following:

"I am feeling unheard which makes me feel dismissed. I have been trying to tell you how I feel but it usually ends up with us fighting. I would appreciate it if we could just sit and have a coffee together and talk and listen to each other. To be closer. We used to do that really well".

If your partner reacts with negativity, you can say "I am not trying to be critical here. I am not blaming you. I really care about you. I want to be closer to you."



Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

2. CONTEMPT:

When we communicate with contempt we are really mean to others - being disrespectful, mocking, cynical, name-calling, being sarcastic, trying to embarrass the person, and deliberately trying to make them feel worthless.

Usually, the contempt approach is to make the other person feel worthless and despised.

Much more than just criticism, contempt is to take a position of superiority over your partner.

An example of contempt would be "You are so useless and worthless. I run around all day after the kids and you just come home and watch tv. You are so pathetic."

The research shows that consistently using contempt as a communication strategy is the greatest predictor of divorce. This style of communication is the most destructive and heartbreaking.



Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

The Gottman Method teaches people to combat contempt by building appreciation and respect into the relationship.

How do you do that?

1. Small things often - regularly expressing gratitude, appreciation, affection, and respect to your partner.
2. The magic ratio of 5:1 - actively pursuing five positive interactions with your partner for every one negative interaction.

What would this look like in everyday life?

If you roll your eyes at your partner when they are telling you something important to them, catch yourself, and actively repair the interaction by apologising for the eye roll, expressing your appreciation that they want to talk with you, giving a warm smile to encourage them to continue, listen with respect, and thank them for sharing.

If this feels like a big change in behaviour, then aim for slow and steady shifts in the right direction.



Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

3. DEFENSIVENESS:

When you are being criticised or perceive that you are being attacked, you might use defensiveness as a communication strategy. The problem is, this strategy perpetuates problems as defensiveness usually involves an element of blame.

Defensiveness might look like making excuses, dismissal, and blame.

Here's an example:

Q: "Did you pick up the milk as I asked you to?"

A: "I was way too busy today. You know I am under the pump. Why couldn't you just get it on the way home from work? Why do I have to do everything?"

The Gottman method teaches people to combat defensiveness by taking responsibility for their part in the situation.

How do you do that?

1. Notice when you get triggered and want to jump into defensiveness - awareness is key!

2. Soothe yourself - take a deep breath.

3. Take responsibility for your part in the situation - "I am sorry, I totally forgot! I was so busy at work that it slipped my mind".

4. Acknowledge your partner's feelings about the situation - "I know that's annoying".

Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR COUPLES

4. STONEWALLING:

When we are overwhelmed and emotionally flooded in a discussion, we might use stonewalling as a reaction.

Stonewalling involves withdrawing from the interaction and relationship - shutting down, tuning out, being unresponsiveness, emotionally withdrawing, or being busy with other things to avoid your partner.

The Gottman Method teaches people to combat stonewalling by soothing our central nervous system and the fight, flight, freeze response.

How do you do that?

1. When things are calm, talk with your partner and agree that calling a 20-minute "time out" is totally ok. You might agree to use the phrase "I need a time out".

2. When things are heated and you feel overwhelmed, let your partner know that you need some time to yourself.

3. Take time to take some deep breaths, go for a walk, or whatever works best for you to calm down.

4. Once calm, think about how you want to respond to your partner and what you want to say.

5. Re-connect with your partner and try communicating clearly and calmly.

Being able to identify when you use these negative communication strategies is the first step, and then actively replacing them with healthy and helpful responses is key to pursuing a satisfying relationship.