



Keep the STRESS down for Effective Communication

Successful couples know how to keep the stress down when dealing with potentially volatile topics. The following are concrete skills that have proven effective in helping couples deal effectively with differences:

- Use a “***Soft Setup***.” The way that a conversation starts is the best predictor of how it will end. Starting on an angry note or wanting to “set someone straight” will almost always end in a heated blow up. Start with something positive, such as sharing your appreciation for something that the person has done. Ask for the person’s help with the changes you are seeking.

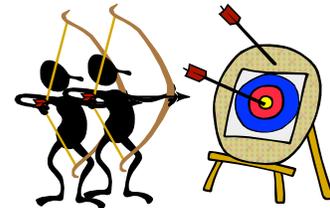


- ***Timing*** is everything. As simple as it sounds, the first step is both parties agreeing to communicate. This means setting aside a time that you can sit down, eliminate distractions, and devote your undivided attention to the communication process. Bringing up an issue as your partner is leaving for work or when you’re putting the kids to bed will most likely end up in the ditch – and the problem will not be solved. In deciding when to talk, remember there are times when it is best to keep your HAT on and postpone efforts: don’t try to force communication when either one of you is **Hungry, Angry or Tired**.

- Make and receive ***Repair Attempts***. Even with good intentions, emotions are likely to rise when dealing with sensitive issues. Be alert to these emotional changes in both yourself and your partner, and rapidly take steps to keep tensions at a manageable level. A repair attempt deescalates tension and helps keep the floor open for compromise. It can be as direct as saying “Hey, let’s take a break” when the discussion becomes too heated. Or, it can be as subtle as injecting a moment of humor into the argument. A repair attempt shows your partner that you are listening, as in “I get your point”, or “Hmm, that’s true”. It’s important to recognize and respond positively to repair attempts. You can view a repair attempt as a bid from your partner, a gesture of moving toward you rather than away from you.



- **Express** your feelings and wants. You are the world's greatest expert on two topics: what you feel and what you want. Claiming expertise in other areas, (especially implying that you have a greater knowledge of truth, reality and the way that the world should be), implies that your partner is clearly lacking your wisdom or common sense. This is an invitation for disaster (remember the importance of respect and admiration?). Rather than "You need to be more supportive!" (Translated: I am the expert on proper roles in the world and you are a pinhead); shift it to your area of undisputed expertise: "I really would like more of your support." You might start with "I" statements or describe how a situation makes you feel. It also helps to be fact-based rather than blaming or judging.
- **Soothe** yourself. This is the physiological component of managing conflict. Know yourself and your reactions. If you start to get worked up, learn to pause and take a deep breath. Take a break if you need to. When your heart rate gets too high you are less likely to "hear" your partner and the Four Horsemen will come charging.
- Work towards **Solutions**. Turn any criticism into a request. The criticism is looking backward and invites defensiveness; the request is moving forward towards change. What is your goal, what are you trying to get, what action are you hoping for by having the conversation?



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