

Relationship Conflict Resolution

Focus on the problem, not the person.

When a disagreement turns to personal insults, raised voices, or mocking tones, the conversation is no longer productive. Be careful to focus on the problem without placing blame on your partner. If a disagreement becomes personal, you should pause the conversation.

Use reflective listening.

Oftentimes during arguments we focus on getting our own point across rather than listening to our partner. Before responding to your partner, restate what they have said to you in your own words. Continue this process until your partner agrees that you understand. Next, share your side. Your partner should reflect back your ideas in their own words until they too understand. Using this technique will help both individuals feel listened to and understood, even if you disagree.

Use “I” statements.

When sharing a concern, begin your sentence with “I”. For example: “I feel hurt when you don’t tell me you’ll be late”. With this sentence format we show that we are taking responsibility for our own emotion rather than blaming our partner. The alternative sentence—“You never tell me when you’re going to be late”—will often cause a partner to become defensive.

Know when to take a time-out.

When you and your partner are becoming argumentative, insulting, or aggressive, it’s a good idea to take a time-out. Have a plan in place so you or your partner can call for a break when needed. Spend some time doing something alone that you find relaxing. When you’ve both calmed down, you and your partner can return to solving the problem. Be sure that you do return—it isn’t a good idea to leave these issues unaddressed.

Work toward a resolution.

Disagreement is a normal part of a relationship. If it becomes clear that you and your partner will not agree, focus on a resolution instead. Try to find a compromise that benefits both individuals. Ask yourself if this disagreement really matters to your relationship, and let yourself move on if not.

Fair Fighting Rules

Before you begin, ask yourself why you feel upset.

Are you truly angry because your partner left the mustard on the counter? Or are you upset because you feel like you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just one more piece of evidence? Take time to think about your own feelings before starting an argument.

Discuss one issue at a time.

"You shouldn't be spending so much money without talking to me" can quickly turn into "You don't care about our family". Now you need to resolve two problems instead of one. Plus, when an argument starts to get off topic, it can easily become about everything a person has ever done wrong. We've all done a lot wrong, so this can be especially cumbersome.

No degrading language.

Discuss the issue, not the person. No put-downs, swearing, or name-calling. Degrading language is an attempt to express negative feelings while making sure your partner feels just as bad. This will just lead to more character attacks while the original issue is forgotten.

Express your feelings with words and take responsibility for them.

"I feel angry." "I feel hurt when you ignore my phone calls." "I feel scared when you yell." These are good ways to express how you feel. Starting with "I" is a good technique to help you take responsibility for your feelings (no, you can't say whatever you want as long as it starts with "I").

Take turns talking.

This can be tough, but be careful not to interrupt. If this rule is difficult to follow, try setting a timer allowing 1 minute for each person to speak without interruption. Don't spend your partner's minute thinking about what you want to say. Listen!

No stonewalling.

Sometimes, the easiest way to respond to an argument is to retreat into your shell and refuse to speak. This refusal to communicate is called stonewalling. You might feel better temporarily, but the original issue will remain unresolved and your partner will feel more upset. If you absolutely cannot go on, tell your partner you need to take a time-out. Agree to resume the discussion later.

No yelling.

Sometimes arguments are "won" by being the loudest, but the problem only gets worse.

Take a time-out if things get too heated.

In a perfect world we would all follow these rules 100% of the time, but it just doesn't work like that. If an argument starts to become personal or heated, take a time-out. Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down.

Attempt to come to a compromise or an understanding.

There isn't always a perfect answer to an argument. Life is just too messy for that. Do your best to come to a compromise (this will mean some give and take from both sides). If you can't come to a compromise, merely understanding can help soothe negative feelings.

"I" Statements

When a person feels that they are being blamed—whether rightly or wrongly—it's common that they respond with defensiveness. **"I" statements** are a simple way of speaking that will help you avoid this trap by reducing feelings of blame. A good "I" statement takes responsibility for one's own feelings, while tactfully describing a problem.

"I feel *emotion word* when *explanation*."

- ✓ "I feel..." must be followed with an emotion word, such as "angry", "hurt", or "worried".
- ✓ Careful wording won't help if your voice still sounds blaming. Use a soft and even tone.
- ✓ In your explanation, gently describe how the other person's actions affect you.

Examples

Blaming	"You can't keep coming home so late! It's so inconsiderate."
"I" Statement	"I feel worried when you come home late. I can't even sleep."

Blaming	"You never call me. I guess we just won't talk anymore."
"I" Statement	"I feel hurt when you go so long without calling. I'm afraid you don't care."

Practice

Scenario	A friend always cancels plans at the last minute. Recently, you were waiting for them at a restaurant, when they called to say they couldn't make it.
"I" Statement	

Scenario	You are working on a group project, and one member is not completing their portion. You have repeatedly had to finish their work.
"I" Statement	

Scenario	Your boss keeps dumping new work on you, with little instruction, and not enough time. Despite working overtime, you're weeks behind.
"I" Statement	

Reflections

Communication Skill

Using a technique called **reflection** can quickly help you become a better listener. When reflecting, you will repeat back what someone has just said to you, but in your own words. This shows that you didn't just hear the other person, but you are trying to understand them.

Reflecting what another person says can feel funny at first. You might think the other person will be annoyed at you for repeating them. However, when used correctly, reflections receive a positive reaction and drive a conversation forward. **Here's an example:**

Speaker: "I get so angry when you spend so much money without telling me. We're trying to save for a house!"

Listener: "We're working hard to save for a house, so it's really frustrating when it seems like I don't care."

✓ Quick Tips

The tone of voice you use for reflections is important. Use a tone that comes across as a statement, with a bit of uncertainty. Your goal is to express: "I think this is what you're telling me, but correct me if I'm wrong." Your reflections don't have to be perfect. If the other person corrects you, that's good! Now you have a better understanding of what they're trying to say.

Try to reflect emotions, even if the person you're listening to didn't clearly describe them. You may be able to pick up on how they feel by their tone of voice or body language.

Switch up your phrasing, or your reflections *will* start to sound forced. Try some of these:

- "I hear you saying that..."
- "It sounds like you feel..."
- "You're telling me that..."

Focus on reflecting the main point. Don't worry too much about all the little details, especially if the speaker had a lot to say!

Reflections

Communication Skill

Practice

“I was in a bad mood yesterday because work has been so stressful. I just can’t keep up with everything I have to do.”

Reflection:

“I feel like I’m doing all of the work around the house. I need you to help me clean and do the dishes more often.”

Reflection:

“I’ve been worried when you don’t answer your phone. I always think something might’ve happened to you.”

Reflection:

“I don’t understand what she wants from me. First she says she wants one thing, then another.”

Reflection:

Assertive Communication



Assertive Communication: A communication style in which a person stands up for their own needs and wants, while also taking into consideration the needs and wants of others, without behaving passively or aggressively.

Traits of Assertive Communicators

- Clearly state needs and wants
- Eye contact
- Listens to others without interruption
- Appropriate speaking volume
- Steady tone of voice
- Confident body language

Assertiveness Tips

Respect yourself. Your needs, wants, and rights are as important as anyone else's. It's fine to express what you want, so long as you are respectful toward the rights of others.

Express your thoughts and feelings calmly. Giving the silent treatment, yelling, threatening, and shaming are all great examples of what not to do. Take responsibility for your emotions, and express them in a calm and factual manner. Try starting sentences with "I feel...".

Plan what you're going to say. Know your wants and needs, and how you can express them, before entering a conversation. Come up with specific sentences and words you can use.

Say "no" when you need to. You can't make everyone happy all the time. When you need to say "no", do so clearly, without lying about the reasons. Offer to help find another solution.

Examples of Assertive Communication

"I've been feeling frustrated about doing most of the chores around the house. I understand that you're busy, but I need help. How can we make this work?"

The speaker takes responsibility for their feelings without blaming, and clearly describes their needs.

"I won't be able to take you to the airport on Friday. I've had a long week, and I want to rest."

The speaker respects their own needs and wants by clearly saying "no".

"I'm having a hard time sleeping when your music is on. What if you use headphones, or I can help you move the speakers to another room."

The speaker describes their needs, while also considering the needs and wants of the other person.

Assertive Communication

Practice

Tip: Before responding, consider what your wants and needs might be in each situation.

Your Partner: “I know you have plans for the weekend, but I really need you to watch the kids. I have a friend coming to town, and we made plans.”

Assertive Response:

Situation: You’ve just received your food at a restaurant, and it was prepared incorrectly. Your sandwich seems to have extra mayo, instead of no mayo.

Assertive Statement:

Your Friend: “Hey, can I borrow some money? I want to buy these shoes, but I left my wallet at home. I’ll pay you back soon, I swear. It won’t be like last time.”

Assertive Response:

Situation: Your neighbor is adding an expansion to their house, and the crew starts working, very loudly, at 5 AM. It has woken you up every day for a week.

Assertive Statement:

Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication

Passive Communication

During passive communication, a person prioritizes the needs, wants, and feelings of others, even at their own expense. The person does not express their own needs, or does not stand up for them. This can lead to being taken advantage of, even by well-meaning people who are unaware of the passive communicator's needs and wants.

- Soft spoken / quiet
- Allows others to take advantage
- Prioritizes needs of others
- Poor eye contact / looks down or away
- Does not express one's own needs or wants
- Lack of confidence

Aggressive Communication

Through aggressive communication, a person expresses that only their own needs, wants, and feelings matter. The other person is bullied, and their needs are ignored.

- Easily frustrated
- Speaks in a loud or overbearing way
- Unwilling to compromise
- Use of criticism, humiliation, and domination
- Frequently interrupts or does not listen
- Disrespectful toward others

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication emphasizes the importance of *both* peoples' needs. During assertive communication, a person stands up for their own needs, wants, and feelings, but also listens to and respects the needs of others. Assertive communication is defined by confidence, and a willingness to compromise.

- Listens without interruption
- Clearly states needs and wants
- Willing to compromise
- Stands up for own rights
- Confident tone / body language
- Good eye contact

Examples

Scenario	A friend asks to borrow your car. This will be a big inconvenience for you.
Passive	Umm, yeah, I guess that's fine. Do you need me to fill the tank?
Aggressive	No way! Why would I let you borrow my car? You're crazy to even ask.
Assertive	I need my car that day, but I'll have time to drop you off.

Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication

Practice

Scenario	Your boss asks you to stay late, while everyone else leaves. You're always the one who stays late, and tonight you have plans.
Passive	
Aggressive	
Assertive	

Scenario	Your partner left a mess in the kitchen, and you're too busy to clean.
Passive	
Aggressive	
Assertive	

Scenario	You're at a restaurant, and the server brought you the wrong dish.
Passive	
Aggressive	
Assertive	

Scenario	A friend showed up at your house uninvited. Usually you would be happy to let them in, but this time you're busy.
Passive	
Aggressive	
Assertive	

What are Personal Boundaries?

Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can say “no” to others when they want to, but they are also comfortable opening themselves up to intimacy and close relationships.

A person who always keeps others at a distance (whether emotionally, physically, or otherwise) is said to have *rigid boundaries*. Alternatively, someone who tends to get too involved with others has *porous boundaries*.

Common traits of rigid, porous, and healthy boundaries.		
Rigid Boundaries	Porous Boundaries	Healthy Boundaries
<p>Avoids intimacy and close relationships.</p> <p>Unlikely to ask for help.</p> <p>Has few close relationships.</p> <p>Very protective of personal information.</p> <p>May seem detached, even with romantic partners.</p> <p>Keeps others at a distance to avoid the possibility of rejection.</p>	<p>Overshares personal information.</p> <p>Difficulty saying “no” to the requests of others.</p> <p>Overinvolved with other’s problems.</p> <p>Dependent on the opinions of others.</p> <p>Accepting of abuse or disrespect.</p> <p>Fears rejection if they do not comply with others.</p>	<p>Values own opinions.</p> <p>Doesn’t compromise values for others.</p> <p>Shares personal information in an appropriate way (does not over or under share).</p> <p>Knows personal wants and needs, and can communicate them.</p> <p>Accepting when others say “no” to them.</p>



Most people have a mix of different boundary types. For example, someone could have healthy boundaries at work, porous boundaries in romantic relationships, and a mix of all three types with their family. One size does *not* fit all!



The appropriateness of boundaries depends heavily on setting. What’s appropriate to say when you’re out with friends might not be appropriate when you’re at work.



Some cultures have very different expectations when it comes to boundaries. For example, in some cultures it’s considered wildly inappropriate to express emotions publicly. In other cultures, emotional expression is encouraged.

What are Personal Boundaries?

Types of Boundaries

Physical boundaries refer to personal space and physical touch. Healthy physical boundaries include an awareness of what's appropriate, and what's not, in various settings and types of relationships (hug, shake hands, or kiss?). Physical boundaries may be violated if someone touches you when you don't want them to, or when they invade your personal space (for example, rummaging through your bedroom).

Intellectual boundaries refer to thoughts and ideas. Healthy intellectual boundaries include respect for others' ideas, and an awareness of appropriate discussion (should we talk about the weather, or politics?). Intellectual boundaries are violated when someone dismisses or belittles another person's thoughts or ideas.

Emotional boundaries refer to a person's feelings. Healthy emotional boundaries include limitations on when to share, and when not to share, personal information. For example, gradually sharing personal information during the development of a relationship, as opposed to revealing everything to everyone. Emotional boundaries are violated when someone criticizes, belittles, or invalidates another person's feelings.

Sexual boundaries refer to the emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of sexuality. Healthy sexual boundaries involve mutual understanding and respect of limitations and desires between sexual partners. Sexual boundaries can be violated with unwanted sexual touch, pressure to engage in sexual acts, leering, or sexual comments.

Material boundaries refer to money and possessions. Healthy material boundaries involve setting limits on what you will share, and with whom. For example, it may be appropriate to lend a car to a family member, but probably not to someone you met this morning. Material boundaries are violated when someone steals or damages another person's possessions, or when they pressure them to give or lend them their possessions.

Time boundaries refer to how a person uses their time. To have healthy time boundaries, a person must set aside enough time for various facets of their lives such as work, relationships, and hobbies. Time boundaries are violated when another person demands too much of another's time.

Boundary Exploration

Think about a person, or a group of people, with whom you struggle to set healthy boundaries. This could mean that your boundaries are too rigid (you keep this person at a distance), too porous (you open up too much), or there's some other problem that isn't so easily labeled.

Who do you struggle to set healthy boundaries with? (e.g. "my husband" or "coworkers")

In your relationship with the person you listed above, how are your boundaries in each of the following categories? Add a check in the appropriate column for each boundary category.

Boundary Category	Porous	Rigid	Healthy	Other
Physical Boundaries				
Intellectual Boundaries				
Emotional Boundaries				
Sexual Boundaries				
Material Boundaries				
Time Boundaries				

Take a moment to imagine what it will be like when you begin to establish healthy boundaries with this person. If your boundaries are too rigid, that might mean opening up. If they're porous, it might mean setting limits and saying "no" when you don't want to do something.

What are some specific actions you can take to improve your boundaries?

How do you think the other person will respond to these changes?

How do you think your life will be different once you've established healthy boundaries?

Relationship Gratitude Tips

As a relationship ages, we sometimes take the things we love about our partners for granted. Practicing gratitude is a great way to show your partner appreciation, while improving the quality of your relationship. Practice at least one of the following gratitude tips every day.

Show interest in their life.

Ask for the specifics about your partner's day. Use *active listening* by making eye contact, showing that you're listening (e.g. saying "mhh-hm" or nodding), and paraphrasing what your partner says. Try to understand what a day is like in their shoes.

Give compliments.

Remember to compliment your partner, just like when you first met. It doesn't matter if you've complimented them 1,000 times. It still matters.

Surprise them.

Who doesn't love a surprise? Plan a date, give a small gift, pack their lunch with a loving note, or complete a chore that your partner usually does. Even a small gesture can show your appreciation.

Help them relax.

If your partner is stressed, give them a relaxing evening. Draw a warm bath with candles and Epsom salts, and offer a back rub without the expectation of anything in return.

Go above-and-beyond with chores.

Don't just do the dishes—clean the kitchen. Fill your partner's gas tank, and wash their car. Do something you don't have to, just to show you care.

Mind your manners.

"Thank you" and "please" are important, even when someone has been doing your laundry for 10 years. Try to catch your partner being helpful, just so you can express your gratitude.

Give an evening off.

Many people cherish alone time, although it can be hard to come by. Surprise your partner with a personalized evening off. Get their favorite meal and some treats, rent a movie they love (or get something for a hobby they enjoy), and leave them be.

Be mindful of body language.

Our bodies can say more than we realize. Even if you don't mean it, your partner will notice if you're always scowling. Make a point to smile, laugh, and touch your partner.

Relationship Growth Activity

Discovery Questions

Instructions: Sometimes in relationships we become so focused on the problems that we forget to see our partner as a person. You can strengthen your relationship by learning more about your partner, and discussing their thoughts and feelings.

Take turns selecting a question from each section below to ask your partner. If you believe you know all of the answers in a section, see if you can answer each one correctly!



The Fun Things

What was your partner's favorite TV show when they were a child?

Where would your partner most like to visit on a vacation?

What song is your partner into right now?

Are there any movies your partner is excited to see?

Has your partner ever read a book that had a major impact on their life?



About Us

When did your partner realize they were interested in you? Was there a specific moment?

What motivates your partner to keep working on your relationship?

What does your partner want your relationship to look like in 5 years?

When was a moment that your partner felt happy about your relationship?

What is your partner's favorite thing to do, or place to go, as a couple?



Hopes & Dreams

How does your partner hope to change over the next year? 5 years? 20 years?

What are three realistic goals your partner has for their lifetime?

What is the happiest life your partner can imagine?

What is one goal your partner has for their career, family, and their personal growth?

What are five things your partner would place on their bucket list?

Relationship Growth Activity

Discovery Questions



Work Life

What's something your partner likes about their job? What's something they dislike?

Who are your partner's best friends at work, and why?

What is the most challenging task your partner has to do at their job?

Besides a paycheck, what does your partner get from their work? (E.g. respect or pride)

What's a typical day at work like, from beginning to end?



Emotions

When in your partner's life did they feel the most scared?

Overall, how has your partner been feeling during the past week?

Does your partner view themselves as a happy person? If not, how do they view themselves?

What is something that can consistently make your partner happy?

How does your partner relax after a stressful day?



Other Relationships

Outside of your relationship, who does your partner feel that they can talk to about problems?

Who is someone that your partner has a negative feeling about, or distrusts?

What is your partner's longest friendship? How have they maintained their friendship?

Who does your partner feel closest to in their family?

Does your partner prefer to spend time alone, or with others?

Relationship Building

Shared Qualities

We would like to visit:

1

2

3

Movies, books, or music we like:

1

2

3

We have fun when we:

1

2

3

As a couple, we're good at:

1

2

3

As a couple, our weaknesses are:

1

2

3

Unique things we have in common:

1

2

3

Qualities we value in a person:

1

2

3

Three goals for our future:

1

2

3
