

## Five Communication Mistakes Almost Every Couple Makes

No matter how in tune you are with your partner, misunderstandings and communication gaffes are always possible. Here are five of the most common, yet avoidable communication mistakes that could harm a relationship.

Some types of communication are more obvious signs your relationship might be doomed: extreme criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. Today let's talk about the more *subtle* ways we might not be communicating as well as we could with our partners—and how to avoid them.

### 1. Assuming That More Communication Is the Solution

Surprise! You've probably heard before that good communication is the cornerstone of a happy relationship, and, while that might be true, communication alone won't necessarily create that happiness. Sometimes, *too much* talking could do the reverse. Erica Curtis, a licensed marriage and family therapist in California, says:

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*One of the biggest mistakes is assuming that communication creates connection. For many women, this is often true (talking helps us feel connected to others) but for many men (and for some women), this is not true. It's important to find ways to connect first, before communicating, or else the communication can just generate further feelings of hurt and disconnection. Connecting through a shared activity, acknowledging the efforts the other person makes, or even just being in physical proximity may create the needed connection required to have open and effective communication.*

It helps to understand your partner's primary communication style. As I mentioned in a previous marriage post, one psychology theory is people have different "love languages," or ways they experience love best: through positive words, touch, quality time, etc. For example, you may be the type for whom actions speak louder than words; if your partner showers you with compliments but never helps with the household chores, that's a big disconnect. If you and your partner find yourselves always talking things out but still never getting over relationship hurdles, maybe concentrate on other, non-verbal ways to connect.

### 2. Expecting Your Partner to Read Your Mind

Remember that time your significant other was supposed to do something you wanted but later you found out he or she had no clue? Yup, try as we might, humans aren't great at reading each other's minds. (We have a hard enough time understanding what we *do* communicate clearly to each other.)

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Melissa Dawn Lieberman offers excellent advice on the Mom It Forward blog [emphasis mine]:

*I used to think that if my husband had an ounce of common sense, he would know what I wanted. For instance, when he came home after working a 12-hour day and found me and the baby home with the stomach flu, I assumed he already knew the answer to the question, "Can I go for a bike ride?" He didn't. If I didn't say, "No," he would leave me there, tossing chunks while I cleaned up baby poop.*

*You really can't assume that your spouse knows how you feel or what you want. You don't share the same feelings, worldview or thoughts. You might notice the dishes in the sink or remember that the kids haven't done their homework yet, but he might not. **When in doubt, say it out loud.***

### 3. Giving in and Not Really Saying What You Want or Think

If one or both people are averse to conflict, chances are emotions will be buried in the name of pleasing the other person. As someone who's the epitome of conflict avoidance, I can assure you that while that keeps the peace for the short-term, it'll only gradually erode your own happiness and, in turn, the relationship. Power to Change writes:

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*Some people describe the ideal marriage as a two-way street. If you don't have any arguments, or one side is always directing the traffic, you are riding on a one-way street without any communication. That's not something to cheer about.*

#### **4. Harping on (Possibly Hopeless) Issues**

The opposite is true as well for couples where both people are stubborn and refuse to compromise. In that case, it's more like a one-lane street with two cars playing chicken with each other. One example of this is what Psychology Today calls the "Woodpecker Syndrome": one person fixates on their feelings and keeps going on and on about it while the other partner withdraws defensively:

*One partner is just not willing to give up, continuing toxic conversations and repeating rash lectures. It does not lead to any constructive dialogue, but a partner affected by the woodpecker syndrome perseveres, as if seeing some invisible "keep going" sign. She becomes a diligent and insensitive lecturer, making forceful monologues that drown in defensive silence. Nothing gets resolved; the relationship deteriorates further. Both partners get exhausted and wary.*

*This is a communication pattern of ever-diminishing returns. Soon just the mentioning of "let's talk" makes one want to run or hide. A pattern of talking at someone, not to someone, breeds disconnect and widens the relational rift. It does not matter how well-intended the comments are once they are delivered as a bullet point list of suggestions or a stern monotone monologue with no intermissions. Such a way is doomed to just sink in silence and can't serve any good purpose.*

Psychology Today's advice? If you're the woodpecker, just stop talking. Rest, regroup, and try a different approach. Maybe on this specific matter you might not ever get your way—or maybe later you'll get through, but not by pecking.

#### **5. Not Considering Things from the Other Person's Point of View**

Sometimes it's just a matter of being clearer, more upfront, or knowing the best way to communicate with your partner that's at the core of better communication. Equally important, though, is making the effort to understand things from your partner's perspective—something we might not always remember to do. Empathy is the most important skill you can practice, personally and professionally. You don't always have to agree with the other person, but at least you'll both be on the same relationship page.