

Overcoming Barriers to Communication

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Have you ever found yourself talking with your partner and suddenly you are in the middle of an argument, not entirely sure how you got there? You made a statement, an observation, or a suggestion that was intended to be thoughtful or helpful and the reaction you got from your partner is not at all what you expected. This is actually quite common among couples for a number of reasons. For instance, when we become part of a couple we start to think that our partner can read our mind. We assume that they know we mean well when we observe, suggest or even criticize.

Another reason this can happen is that we forget that what we say gets filtered through our own experience when we say it. In other words, we put things out there in a way that we would feel comfortable hearing it. Those words then get filtered through our partner's experience. This means for example, that you have made a statement that is seemingly neutral to you, however your partner has just gotten off the phone with a particularly critical parent who has just finished subtly highlighting some of your partner's flaws. Your "neutral" statement is now being filtered through "sensitive ears" and you have unknowingly triggered an argument.

There are a few things that you can practice to improve communication with your partner and find your way out of the situations that lead you into the unanticipated argument.

1. **Recognize when the reaction you've gotten from your partner is not what you expected.** Often times this means there was an error in communication. If you were expecting a smile, or a sigh of relief and you got snapped at and an angry glare, calmly and thoughtfully let your partner know that's not what you were expecting.

"Oh no, I really didn't mean to upset you. I was trying to be helpful (supportive, encouraging) and I think it came out wrong. I'm sorry. I love you. What can I do to be helpful here?"

When you tune in to your own feelings of confusion regarding your partner's response (Oh no, I really didn't mean to upset you.) you can explore that. Get more information (what can I do to be helpful here?). If you do it from a loving, calm and vulnerable place (I was trying to be helpful and I think it came out wrong. I'm sorry. I love you.), your partner will often feel that, which can help to keep emotions from escalating.

2. **If you are not 100% certain about what your partner is requesting, get more information.** Many times we go into mind reading mode. We assume we know what our partner needs/wants and we try to do it for them. When that has negative, sometimes even disastrous results, we get frustrated, feel helpless and that can translate into an argument. What you want is clarity. When your partner makes a request like, "I really need you to be there for me more", you may be unsure of just what that means. You then do your best to "be there" by offering up solutions to your partner's ongoing difficulties with a co-worker, or you try asking lots of questions about what is bothering your partner. Sometimes these heartfelt, and sincere attempts to be supportive can be met with frustration and dismissiveness.

The problem here is that your partner's request was too general. You may have a different idea about what it means to "be there" than your partner does. Or it could be that, what you did last week doesn't fulfill your partner's needs in this particular situation.

Ask questions; get information. "I really love you and I can see that you're hurting (struggling, sad, frustrated). I want to be supportive. Can you tell me exactly how I might do that for you?" If your partner can't be specific with you, then make some suggestions. "Would you like me to help solve the problem or just let you vent? Would it feel better if I gave you a hug and told you that you are special, because you are?"

Again, if your questions come from a loving, and genuine place of support and caring, your partner will feel that and may be able to be more specific with you about how you might help.

3. **Be specific with your own requests of your partner.** Just as you can become confused by what your partner needs if you don't have enough information, the same can happen for your partner. Sometimes this can feel as if your partner just doesn't care. Your partner can't read your mind either, so you have to know exactly what you need and communicate that. Often times we want our partner to "just know" what to do to make us feel better. That can be an unreasonable expectation of someone.

We don't often take the time to think about specifically what we need to feel supported in most situations. We just know we want to feel it from our loved one. When you can't express to yourself that you need your partner to be on your side and not dismiss you when you feel challenged by something that seems unimportant to him/her, it would be a stretch to think that your partner would know that is what you needed.

Let your partner know exactly what *behaviors* you would like to see. "I'm having a really bad day. It would make me feel a lot closer to you if you could tell me you understand my frustration with this project." Or maybe, "I'm feeling disconnected from you right now and I want to feel closer. Could you please put your arm around me and sit with me for 5 minutes? I love you and I miss feeling that closeness."

Your partner will have a much easier time supporting you and giving you what you need if you provide specific behaviors you'd like them to do. Simple and reasonable is best.

4. **Have faith that your partner has the best intentions.** Unless you are *absolutely certain* that your partner has malicious intent behind his/her behavior, give him/her the benefit of the doubt. The reality is that in many relationships we do things that we think are protective of the relationship which get interpreted by our partner as hurtful.

When we truly care for our partner, we don't usually think of ways to "get away" with things. We *do* have trouble telling the one's we love about things that might upset them. So, in an effort to protect that person, we tell a lie, or we omit some information. The thinking is that it will protect the partner from feeling hurt. Sometimes it is about self-protection as well, "I'm afraid of what my partner will think of me."

If you can remember that your partner cares for you and is not "out to get you" it can be easier to manage these situations. Let your partner know that you are disappointed that they lied to you, and that you can see why they may have done it. "I feel really sad and scared about the integrity of our relationship when you lie to me. I do understand that it was probably scary for you to tell me that you were talking with your ex. I'd feel much better if you would be up front about things like this so we can talk about what it means. I love you and I don't want stuff like this to get in the way of our relationship."

We are not taught to speak to others with our hearts. It's a difficult thing to do. It leaves us vulnerable and open to rejection with little protection for our feelings. However, it is much easier to relate to someone you care for in a difficult situation when they are speaking from the heart. It is tough to be angry with someone who is telling you that they genuinely want to be supportive, and they need more guidance in how to do it.

If you find yourself in a strong and loving relationship, these are things you can practice to try to improve that strength and create a bond that keeps you connected. It is important to keep in mind that none of these things are easy to do, which is why it says to "practice" the above tips. It is unlikely that you will be able to do all, or any of these things successfully the first time. You may start to recognize where you could have applied one of these techniques after an argument is over. That's a good start. Next time you might recognize it while you are in the middle of the argument and you may or may not be successful. Keep practicing. It gets easier and your partner will thank you.