

The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues (FFCI)
A refereed e-journal designed to integrate, apply, and transmit knowledge about issues of
current interest in family and consumer sciences
ISSN 15405273

Connecting as a couple: Communication skills for healthy relationships

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Abstract

Effective communication is critical for building and maintaining strong couple relationships. Communication includes more than words and grammar. In fact, the emotional layer of communication may be one of the most important for couples. This article reviews basic communication theory and lays the foundation for teaching emotional communication skills to couples.

Keywords: marriage, relationships, communication, conflict, emotions, skills

Introduction

There is mounting evidence that “couples build intimacy through hundreds of very ordinary, mundane moments in which they attempt to make emotional connections” (Driver and Gottman 2004). This paper will address some of the emotional connection skills that strong couples may want to have in their relationship toolbox. Communication involves *connecting* by sharing information or resources, seeking support or comfort, forming alliances, conveying emotion, or effecting some change in their environment. The connection that is established via communication does not have to be purposeful as long as one party understands some meaning from the other. For example, a wife might be very upset with her husband for forgetting to clean up the living room, and the husband may read this in her expression (e.g., huffing while she picks up trash) or nonverbal cues (e.g., slamming the pillows on the couch) even though she may say nothing about it to him.

Humans have developed particularly elaborate verbal and nonverbal means for communication as well intricate rules for how this kind of connection is accomplished. Communication requires a set of common symbols, ranging from verbal and written to the rich set of paralinguistic and emotive markers that people use in their interactions. Much communication is non-verbal. Take as an example, the simple phrase “Aren’t you beautiful.” The tone and expression with which it is uttered matter tremendously. It might make a wife feel differently if her husband says with a

beaming smile and a catch in his voice, “Aren’t you beautiful” than if he sneers in an ugly moment, “Aren’t you beautiful.” A lot of what partners communicate to each other does not come out in words.

Communication is important

Communication is fundamental to human interaction and intimate couple relationships, in part because communication is a tool for knowing or emotionally connecting with one another. In one study of couples, both men and women agreed that the emotional connection they shared with their partner was what determined the quality of their relationships and whether they believed they had a good marriage or not (Barnett and Rivers 1996). A positive emotional connection includes “having a partner who really *talks* to you, is a good *listener*, is a good friend, likes and appreciates you as a person, and does his or her share to make the relationship work” (Barnett and Rivers 1996, 190). Communication between intimate partners is more than words – it involves establishing an emotional connection.

Sociolinguists have noticed some typical gender differences in how women and men communicate (Kendall and Tannen 2001). These gender differences are based on averages, so there are always exceptions among individuals. The patterns can be summed up as women, compared to men, more often express themselves verbally. They are more likely to offer and expect verbal support accompanied by intense eye contact. Researchers have found that men are often over-stimulated by this kind of communication and may withdraw (Gottman and Krokoff 1989). Marriage practitioners have begun to explore the implications of this for supporting couple relationships (Love and Stosny 2007). Rather than teaching couples that communication is primarily about verbal expression, some are now arguing that the focus should be on supporting “deep emotional connection [as] a personal choice” (Love and Stosny 2007, 199) that is created and maintained by communication, although not necessarily or exclusively with words.

Good communication and problem-solving skills are critical for relationship success; however, healthy relationships require much more than good communication and problem-solving skills. There is a common over-reliance on these as the “royal road to romance and an enduring, happy marriage” (Gottman and Silver 1999, 8). These skills are necessary but not sufficient for solid relationships and should be contextualized as part of the larger couple system. (For information about other key practices to building and maintaining a healthy relationship, see the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model, <http://www.nermen.org/projects.php>.)

Emotional communication

Emotional communication, that is, the creation of relationship-relevant meaning within a couple for purposes of connection, is like the circulatory system of a relationship. It allows meaning and sentiment to flow between partners. It is the system for paying attention to each other. Gottman and DeClaire (2001) argue “[m]aybe it’s not the depth of intimacy in conversations that matters. Maybe it doesn’t even matter whether couples agree or disagree. Maybe the important thing is *how* these people pay attention to each other.” (28)

What is the basis of healthy communication patterns? Intimacy begins when a partner shares or communicates something personal and important to them and the other partner responds in an encouraging way. This sharing of something important does not have to be explicit or direct.

Often it is quite tentative and subtle. Recently, researchers have begun to understand that the mundane everyday repeated interactions that couples have are at least as important as their conventionally intimate interactions and their conflicts (Driver and Gottman 2004). Couples need to pay more attention to their “patterns of emotional engagement and responsiveness in contexts other than conflict resolution” (Gottman et al. 1998, 20). The basic units of emotional communication during everyday interactions have been called the *bid* and the *response* (Driver and Gottman 2004). These units are so important that researchers can now predict relationship outcomes by observing the bid-response patterns in a couple’s everyday interactions.

The *bid* is an initiation of interaction (Driver and Gottman 2004). It is the way a person expresses “I want to feel connected to you,” although it may have an endless variety of forms and content. That is, bids are often not a literal request for attention and connection but may be ostensibly about something else. For example, a woman might say to her husband, “Honey, I had a bad day today.” On the surface, this is a statement of fact. It provides the husband with information. The bid may be verbal or nonverbal. A bid may be extended nonverbally, for example with a touch (maybe playful or flirty), a facial expression (a smile, a roll of the eyes, or cocked eyebrows), or a sound (a laugh, sigh, or snort). If the person chooses to connect by verbal means, the form might be a question, a simple statement of perceived fact, an explicit invitation, or a fragment of a thought or feeling. A bid can be laced with an emotional overtone using tone of voice, word choice, or expression.

The *response* is how the other person handles the bid. Besides the specific content, a response can communicate that the respondent is paying attention to and cares about the bidder. Intimate partners generally expect their bids to be met with understanding and empathy. In the example, if the husband simply responded “Thanks for the information,” the wife would be greatly disappointed and probably irritated. She expects him to respond to her underlying need for his support and attention. Something like, “Oh, I’m sorry, honey. What happened?” Responses can be characterized as turning toward, turning away from, or turning against the bidder (Driver and Gottman 2004). A partner who turns toward may acknowledge the other’s statement, make eye contact, or touch the other’s hand. A partner who ignores the other’s statement or averts eye contact is turning away. Turning against the other may involve active negative responses such as responding contemptuously to a statement.

Strategies for successful connection

How can partners connect in ways that enrich their relationship? There are many elements of successful communication. Researchers and practitioners agree that the following communication strategies are predictive of relationships that work.

Keep it clear. While they do not have to be verbal or direct, it is important that the emotional connection function of bids and responses be clear. Couple communication efforts can be ambiguous for different reasons:

- (1) there is a history of bids and responses being misunderstood or rejected
- (2) the partner is confused about what he or she feels and wants and so does not communicate clearly
- (3) the partner is not skilled at communication and does not know how to frame the bid

or response and

- (4) the partner may want to connect with the other but may be too angry to communicate effectively.

Research has shown that those who are able to be clear about their underlying need for connection (an important function of the bid regardless of its form and content) are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Driver and Gottman 2004). The same is true for those who respond in ways that clearly support connection.

Keep it soft. Partners who master the ability to communicate “softly,” without being highly aggressive, contemptuous, or insulting, are more likely to get positive rather than negative responses. Those who use gentle humor and playfulness in their efforts and liberally sprinkle it throughout their interactions are more likely to have quality relationships that last (Driver and Gottman 2004). When most of a couple’s interactions can be characterized as having a soft-start up and using humor, their connection is generally strong even if they also are high in conflicts (Gottman 1993). This can provide a solid foundation for difficult times.

Keep it safe. The ways in which partners interact contributes to the emotional environment of the relationship. Healthy relationships require creating an environment of mutual care and validation (Coyne and Smith 1994). For example, being mostly engaged (as opposed to withdrawing), validating feelings and intentions, soothing, and unjudgemental in couple interactions are likely to create a safe environment where intimacy can flourish (Gottman 1994a). Honest, loving communication should be framed positively, without contemptuousness, blame, or sarcasm. Contemptuousness and criticism are highly predictive of relationship instability (Gottman 1994).

Keep it positive. A predominance of positive interactions is important if communication is to connect rather than isolate and alienate. A pattern of positive emotional interaction is built up over time (Fredrickson 2001). The amount of positive affect partners show one another, especially during conflict situations, is highly predictive of happy and stable relationships (Gottman et al. 1998). The emotional tone of everyday interactions seems to build a foundation for how positive couples will be during conflict (Driver and Gottman 2004). Generally, positive individuals care about how their partner’s day went and how they are feeling. They try to make their partner feel good about themselves. They try to be romantic and fun with their partner. When having disagreements, they attempt to be patient and understanding with their spouse and cooperative when resolving disputes. A positive response does not always mean saying “yes” or agreeing. But it does mean responding in an attentive way that is respectful of the other’s basic need for connection.

Gottman reports greater success in relationships where there is more positive bidding and more positive responding (Driver and Gottman 2004). A bidder who gets a positive response is more likely to bid again than one who does not. It is clearly a case where more is better (as long as these are positive). Those who are more attentive or mindful in their relationships are likely to have more success than those who simply allow life to flow unheeded around them. Attentiveness to personal needs allows one to clearly bid for a partner’s attention. Likewise, mindfulness of that partner’s needs means that the individual is able to frame bids positively and also engage in more turning toward responses to the partner’s bids for connection.

Open communication connects us

When driving a car, a “dead end” sign influences most drivers to avoid the street where it is posted. Those who insist on turning there will not make progress until they turn around and come back out. The same is true in intimate relationships. Partners can create an expectation of an open street in their relationship by having a history of positive, clear bids and “turning toward” responses. Such a constructive history sets the stage for future success.

In her book, *The Dance of Connection*, practitioner Harriet Lerner (2002) talks about having an authentic voice in important intimate relationships. She argues that a crucial part of having an authentic voice is “openly shar[ing] competence as well as problems and vulnerability (Lerner 2002, 3). Her long-term clinical practice suggests that truly intimate communication entails partners fully listening to one another and asking clarifying questions that allow them to know each other more deeply. Successfully intimate partners are also able state their own feelings and thoughts, even when those differ from their partner’s.

Being open also is associated with sharing power in a relationship. Power dynamics are often played out in communicative interactions. For example, research indicates that couples have happier and more stable marriages when husbands are more accepting of influence from their wives (Coan, Gottman, Babcock, and Jacobson 1997; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson 1998). In other words, they are more likely to use turning toward responses and be open to and accepting of the wife’s ideas. Thus, it is important for couples to feel comfortable and practice mutual influence in order to feel accepted and understood.

Handling conflict in a relationship

Conflict is common in intimate couples and can be a sign of a healthy relationship while utter lack of disagreement may signal trouble (Gottman et al. 2000; Gottman et al. 1998; Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman 2000). A powerful claim has emerged from researchers that “a lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship” (Gottman 1994b, 28). In the past decade many professionals have begun to pay less attention to conflicts and more attention to the everyday interactions of couples. Based on subsequent research and clinical experience, Gottman and others began to argue that everyday interaction patterns often prove to be practice runs for how a couple will interact when the chips are down and a conflict emerges (Driver and Gottman 2004).

When conflicts occur, bidders and respondents must use the same basic communication skills outlined above. Ideally, they must turn toward each other and respond rather than avoid the issue. They should strive to keep bids and responses positive. Clinician Harriet Lerner (2002) observed about her own marriage: “Our marriage is definitely more intimate because we *can* fight. When we fight well, we emerge from the fray with a deeper knowledge of ourselves and the other” (145). What seems to matter most for emotional and relationship well-being for couples is not *whether* they argue, but rather *how* they argue and resolve their differences (Gottman et al. 1998). Conflicts can be opportunities for learning more and increasing intimacy.

Conflicts are normal, but *unhealthy* relationship patterns sometimes emerge in conflict situations including escalation, withdrawal, negative interpretations, and putdowns (Gottman 1994a). Each occasionally occurs in healthy relationships, but when they become the norm, couples should be

encouraged to seek professional support. In education and prevention work, practitioners must be careful not to slide down the slippery slope from education and prevention to full-blown clinical/therapeutic intervention (Doherty 1995). Educational goals with couples can include helping them self-identify and reach out for help as necessary. Educators and other professionals should come to each workshop armed with a list of local counselors, books, web sites, and other resources for couples who want to know more about getting outside help. Because these conflict patterns are so important, each will be considered in more detail.

Escalation. When escalation occurs, something unpleasant starts, the intensity rises rapidly and pretty soon, everything is out of hand. This occurs when couples trade negative, hurtful responses back and forth, with each comment becoming more negative than the last and partners becoming defensive. Learning to de-escalate is critical for the happiness and stability of relationships (Gottman et al. 1998). There are several de-escalating strategies, including simply softening the tone voice, empathizing with the partner's point of view, engaging in self-soothing, and using a cooling off period or "time-out."

Avoidance or withdrawal. Avoidance or withdrawal occurs when one partner shows they are unwilling to start or continue an interaction. This pattern is also called "stonewalling" (Gottman and Levenson 1992) and occurs when one partner just "checks out" of the conflict while the other remains or wants to remain engaged. Sometimes it happens when the avoider is feeling overwhelmed or flooded. This can be a serious problem if the engaged partner believes the withdrawer is avoiding *them* instead of understanding that most often the avoidance is of conflict itself. To prevent this pattern from fostering *chronic disconnection*, both partners must try to meet in the middle: the engaged partner may need to back off a little bit and turn down the intensity, while the withdrawing partner may have to stretch out of their comfort zone to stay more involved even if they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Both will need to work diligently to keep interactions positive.

Negative interpretations. Negative interpretation patterns often occur when couples believe the worst instead of the best about each other (Fincham, Bradbury, and Scott, 1990; Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson 1985). Such couples are definitely not "keeping it positive." They may engage in a harsh start-up bid based on a negative interpretation or assumption. They may turn against or away from their partner when responding to a bid. Partners who are prone to negative interpretations might instead try entertaining a positive reason for the other's behaviors and sharing these with their partner. For example, instead of, "You did not take out the trash because you want to make me angry," Jim might say to his wife, Peg, "I am sure you didn't take out the trash because you thought I might have more to add to the can."

Put downs. At times, negative interpretations can devolve into verbalized insults, such as if Jim had said "You did not take out the trash because you are lazy." Now, he has not only made a negative assumption about Peg's character, but he has also verbalized it into a full-fledged insult. Contemptuous put-downs are destructive to emotional connection and are linked to the failure of relationships (Gottman et al. 1998). These can be plain or indirect but often involve ridicule or sarcasm. Just like "sticks and stones," words *can* hurt. Couples can avoid this by taking a moment to calm down and think, and trying to reframe the situation before they allow themselves to say things they may later regret.

Teaching communication to couples

Teaching couples about communication strategies that promote healthy relationships is much like planting seeds. Couples should not expect whole life-pattern changes from limited contact workshops or miracle formulas for relationship happiness. Rather, they should be able to expect some basic knowledge and a palette of strategies and skills that may encourage them to seek more information and develop further skills.

Also, most couples will experience anger and distress in their relationships, and these are not predictive of separation or divorce (Gottman and Levenson 1992). Healthy couples usually know how to repair relative minor damage in a way that keeps them together and happy. However, high intensity negativity and abuse should not be ignored. Additionally, repeated occurrences of behaviors such as nasty criticism or contempt, or aggressive defensiveness are some important signs that a relationship may need help. People seek professional help when symptoms of physical illness occur, and couples should also seek assistance when symptoms of “illness” occur their relationships.

Educating couples on strategies to develop healthy relationships does not mean advocating that partners remain in a dangerous or abusive relationship in an effort to “fix” it. Participants in couples education should recognize that developing skills for physical and emotional wellness is also important. Educators should have a referral list to pass out at couple relationship programs that includes a domestic violence hotline number, local contact information for counselors and clergy who specialize in couples interventions, and a list of excellent books and on-line resources for couples. If there is not abuse, emotional communication skills can be the skeleton of a strong, connected couple.

Conclusion

So, are lovers simply “made for each other” or not? Are intimate relationships matters of destiny? These ideas may be core elements of fairy tales or romance novels, but in real lives, successful relationships require some work! Some of that work concerns communication. This article has stressed that couples communication is not just about exchanging information or messages. Beyond the content of the messages exchanged, *emotional connection* occurs during the bid and response of communication. A bid is essentially a request for attention and connection, however it is framed. The ways bids are structured and the responses they get have implications for couple intimacy. Couples can be encouraged to attend to their existing patterns, perhaps by using tracking records or journals, to facilitate deeper understanding of how they are bidding and responding. As a next step, couples can be educated to understand that communication is not merely a matter of style or personal preference but entails a series of “skills” that can be developed, refined, practiced, and revisited as necessary. This paper has addressed some of the skills that strong couples may want to have in their relationship toolbox. Family professionals are uniquely positioned to educate and empower couples to attain and maintain these skills.

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Cite this article

Wiley, Angela R. 2007. Connecting as a couple: Communication skills for healthy relationships. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 12 (1).

On-line: <http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2007/v12-n1-2007-spring/index-v12-n1-may-2007.php>