

Couples' Communication Cheat Sheet

How to Turn Fights into Conversations



Use this guide the next time you and your partner have to discuss something that you typically fight about.

If it feels awkward and unnatural it means you're doing it right! Once you get into the habit of communicating with these steps it will feel much more natural.

1. FIND A GOOD TIME TO TALK

Speaker: "I have something that's been on my mind that I'd like to talk to you about. When would be a good time to do that?"

Listener: (Offer a day and time that you are available and will be focused and ready to have a discussion.)

2. WARM STARTUP

Begin with something positive and focus on how you are feeling by using "I" statements.

Speaker: "I really appreciate how much effort you've been making to clean up the house. It sometimes feels to me like you're upset at me for doing the dishes. When I hear you complaining or making sarcastic comments while you're cleaning up, it makes me feel like you are making fun of what I've asked for and that hurts my feelings. It makes me feel like you're resentful of me and I worry you will take it out on me in a fight at some point."

Listener: (Just listen. Ask clarifying questions only. Example of a clarifying question: What have you heard me say that makes you feel that way? Not an example of a clarifying question: Can you just tune me out then?)

3. SUMMARIZE

Speaker: (Once you are done talking, be clear that you are finished.) That's all.

Listener: "If I understand you correctly...." And then summarize what you understand.

Speaker: (If your partner missed something important or misunderstood, calmly re-explain.)

4. VALIDATE

Listener should show that s/he understands why the Speaker feels the way they do.

Listener: "I can understand why you would feel that way. When I'm sarcastic, it can seem like I'm mocking you when you've asked for help."

Speaker: (Listen and affirm if validation is correct)

5. EMPATHIZE

Listener should offer a guess as to how Speaker must feel when the offending event occurs. Sometimes the Speaker may already share how s/he feels but offer an additional emotion to really show that you are trying to fully grasp what the complaint is about.

Listener: "I imagine hearing me make sarcastic comments must make you feel like you are not important to me or that I don't like you very much."

Speaker: (Affirm if correct or offer an alternate, more accurate, emotion if applicable.)

6. APOLOGIZE

Once the Speaker feels like Listener really understands, then offer an apology.

Listener: "I'm so sorry that I hurt your feelings." Or "I apologize that my comments make you feel so bad."

Once Speaker feels understood, this would be the time to switch roles and start from the top if the Listener (now new Speaker) has something on their mind about the same topic.

If at any point in the conversation you find yourself wanting to escalate and fight, walk away for at least 20 minutes.