

# THE MAGIC OF **communication** IN MARRIAGE

*enlighten your marriage with these clear communication techniques*



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# introduction

**Y**ou fell in love and all the world was right. You finished each other's sandwiches **AND** your sentences. You probably thought nothing could ever come between your love for each other.

Many couples enter marriage thinking it's impossible they'll ever find anything to disagree about, much less fight over. As marriage gets real though, some of those things you used to think were cute may become annoying - annoying enough to cause a little spat or two. **Eventually, those tiny quirks have the potential to create major issues and drive you away from each other. But you don't want that to happen, right? Right!**

Sweeping issues under the rug won't help at all, and **your marriage deserves so much more than that.** That's why we want to help you work it all out with a little *communication magic*.

You see, **healthy communication can help you be fully in tune with each other and help you navigate the ups and downs like a pro.** With a little effort, you can enhance your conversations and learn to read each other like a really good love story that has no end.



# what works

(AND WHAT DOESN'T)

**R**esearch on what makes marriage work indicates that **happy and healthy couples have five times as many positive interactions** (i.e. listening, validating the other person, using soft words, expressing appreciation, affirmation, physical affection, compliments, etc.) **than negative ones** (i.e. raising one's voice, stating a complaint, or expressing one's anger).

In contrast, Dr. John Gottman has identified some hostile forms of communication that put couples at high risk for divorce when these patterns frequently occur. He calls them "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Trust us: You don't want these guys hanging around. They are bad news. But don't worry, there are antidotes!

## the four horsemen of the apocalypse:

CRITICISM

CONTEMPT

DEFENSIVENESS

STONEWALLING



**CRITICISM** is defined as blaming, fault-finding or using negative labels to attack your spouse's character. For example, "How would you know? You're never home," or "My problem with you is ..." A harsh startup, or attacking someone verbally when you're upset, often comes in the form of criticism.



**CONTEMPT** is a lack of respect for your spouse's dignity or an attitude of superiority.

Contempt can include name-calling, put-downs, sarcasm, cynicism, swearing at each other, rolling your eyes, mockery or hostile humor. This horseman also includes belligerence, which is an aggressive and angry provocation or threat. Contempt is demeaning and condescending. It doesn't just

convey disapproval of your spouse's behavior, but disgust with who your spouse is. While the other three horsemen show up in small amounts in most marriages, contempt is only found in toxic relationships. It's a **MAJOR** red flag that there are some serious problems.



**DEFENSIVENESS** is a way of turning back a perceived attack.

Someone who is defensive denies their spouse's statements, refuses to admit their role in problems, avoids responsibility for how they impact their spouse, or deflects their spouse's complaints back onto them. Defensiveness is destructive because it escalates tension and creates an adversarial interaction.



**STONEWALLING** usually occurs as a result of escalating criticism, contempt and defensiveness when emotional overload becomes intense. Stonewallers stubbornly refuse to give any verbal or nonverbal feedback that they are listening to what their spouse is saying. They may even get up and leave the room - that's why it's like talking to a stone wall. Stonewalling is best seen as a containment strategy used to avoid further escalation of the conflict. The problem is that the stonewaller doesn't just avoid the fight, but avoids his spouse and the relationship as well. According to John Gottman's research, 85% of stonewallers are men.

## but here's what does work



**GENTLE STARTUP** A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, but criticism attacks a person's very character. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame by using a soft or gentle startup. Avoid saying "you," which can indicate blame, and instead talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express what you need in a positive way. To put it simply, think of these two things to formulate your soft startup: What do I feel? What do I need?



### **BUILD A CULTURE OF APPRECIATION**

Contempt is destructive and defeating. It is the greatest predictor of divorce, and it must be avoided at all costs. The antidote to contempt is to build a culture of appreciation and respect in your relationship, and there are a few ways to do that. One of our mottoes is “Small Things Often.” If you regularly express appreciation, gratitude, affection, and respect for your partner, you’ll create a positive perspective in your relationship that acts as a buffer for negative feelings. The more positive you feel, the less likely that you’ll feel or express contempt!



### **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY**

Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You’re saying that the problem isn’t me, it’s you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict. By taking responsibility for part of the conflict, you can prevent the conflict from escalating by admitting your role in it. From here, you as a couple can work toward a compromise.



### **PHYSIOLOGICAL SELF-SOOTHING**

When couples stonewall, they’re under a lot of emotional pressure, which increases heart rates, releases stress hormones into the bloodstream, and can even trigger a fight-or-flight response. Therefore, the antidote to stonewalling is to practice physiological self-soothing, and the first step of self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion and call a timeout.

## **discussion questions:**

Share with your spouse how anger was handled in your childhood home.

How do you typically behave when you are angry?

Does your behavior get the response you want? If not, what do you think you could do differently?

Ask your spouse if he/she is comfortable with how you handle anger.

Discuss some options for handling anger in healthy ways in your home, keeping in mind that you are not on opposing teams.

# talk to me, baby!

Whether you and your honey argue all the time or communicate pretty well, **good communication is always something you can both work on together.** So, if you want to improve the quality of communication in your relationship, here's a good place to start:



**Be intentional about talking to each other.** The average couple spends only 20 minutes a week talking with each other, but you can do better than that! If you want a "better than average" marriage, turn off the technology and make it your mission to spend 20-30 minutes a day catching up.



**Use more "I" statements and less "You" statements** (unless you want to make your spouse feel like they need to defend themselves). For example, "I wish you would acknowledge more often how much work I do at home to take care of you and the children," is better than, "You just don't appreciate anything."



**Be specific when issues arise.** Broad generalizations like, "You do it all the time!" are not helpful.



**Avoid trying to mind-read.** If someone else acts like they know better than you what you're really thinking, that can be frustrating. If you want to know something, ask, but please don't assume. Also, if you have something to say, say it. Don't drop hints or just hope your partner figures out what you really want (like a night out, help with the dishes, a fancy gadget or a midday rendezvous).





**Express negative feelings constructively.** It's important to communicate your feelings of bitterness, resentment, disappointment or disapproval, but how you express these thoughts is critical. For example, "I am really disappointed that you are working late again tonight," is very different from, "You clearly do not care about me or the kids. If you did, you wouldn't work late every night."



**Listen without being defensive.** If you want your marriage to thrive, you've got to hear each other's complaints without going on the D-E-F-E-N-S-E. This is even harder than learning how to express negative feelings effectively (but thankfully, it's not impossible).



**Freely express positive feelings.** Of course, it's easier to express negative feelings than positive ones, but affirming your spouse is vital to the health of your marriage. Showing appreciation, affection, respect, admiration, approval and warmth to your spouse is like making deposits into a love account. Try to make five positive deposits for every negative withdrawal. More than likely, if your compliments exceed your complaints, your spouse will pay attention to your grievances. On the flip side, your criticism will fall flat if all you do is complain. Oh, and when your spouse compliments you, receive it with gusto.



**Be willing to apologize and/or ask for forgiveness.** This can be SOOOO hard, but it's SOOOO important. Because the truth is, nobody can be Mr. or Mrs. Right All The Time.



# it's not what you say, but how you say it

**I**f you think communication is all about words, you might want to think again. **In addition to the words you use, your tone communicates how you feel.** Believe it or not, the tone you use can even predict marital success or failure.

How we say what we say can come across as welcoming or affirming, or it can sound dismissive, frustrating or condescending. Try saying, "I love you" with a smile. Now, say, "I love you" with a smile, but through gritted teeth. Which one is more believable?

When you're talking with your mate, you may automatically reflect the tone or the volume you hear coming from them. When the tone is positive, that's great! But when it is negative, that's bad news for the conversation (and your love life).

**"you may automatically reflect the tone or the volume you hear coming from them."**

If your partner speaks in a negative way (real or perceived), you can choose to counteract the tone and steer the conversation in a more positive direction when you:



**Change the tone or volume** when you respond. Instead of pumping up the volume, take it down a notch before you even start. It's really not that helpful to yell at your love from another room, or to speak so loudly that someone in another room (or across the street) can hear your business.



**Remember to use those "I" statements** when you address negativity. Examples are, "I feel," "I noticed," "I experience," etc.



**Mind your manners.** Show common courtesy to your mate. Saying please and thank you in a sweet way can turn the tide. Appreciation accentuates the positive.



**Avoid yelling.** Did you know that the brain reacts to a loud tone of voice as a perceived threat? It literally makes your body involuntarily produce adrenaline and sends you into defense mode. Raising your voice to a yell indicates that you have lost self-control (and if there's one thing everyone wants, it's some level of control).



**Drop the sarcasm.** Sarcasm can be funny, but it's not the best way to promote honest conversation. Instead, it can be downright hurtful and condescending, it may feel like mockery or bullying to whoever's on the receiving end, or be used to cover up real emotion. If you want to have a genuine conversation, lessen hostility and remove barriers, sarcasm is not your friend, here. It does way more harm than good.

# can you hear me now? great!

**F**un fact: We have two ears but only one mouth, and that's an easy way to remember that listening can be twice as important as talking.

Now here's a little secret you might not know...  
**Hearing is not listening.**

Hearing doesn't require effort. It's the automatic, accidental, effortless ability to pick up sound.

On the other hand, **listening is an art**. Active listening takes intentionality and focus - and it's totally voluntary. **You must choose to do it**. It requires critical thinking skills and emotional intelligence to interpret that someone is clearly NOT fine even if they say they are. (*Or to discern that your mate really doesn't want Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Thai or American food when they said they were open to anything to eat on a night out and that you could choose.*)

**“active listening takes intentionality and focus – and it's totally voluntary”**

Stephen Covey wrote in his famous book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "**Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply,**" and that happens a lot.

However, **something powerful happens when people feel like they are not only being heard, but completely listened to**. It doesn't even mean that you necessarily agree with them, but that you care about what they have to say. If you want your mate to open up, **LISTEN WELL**.

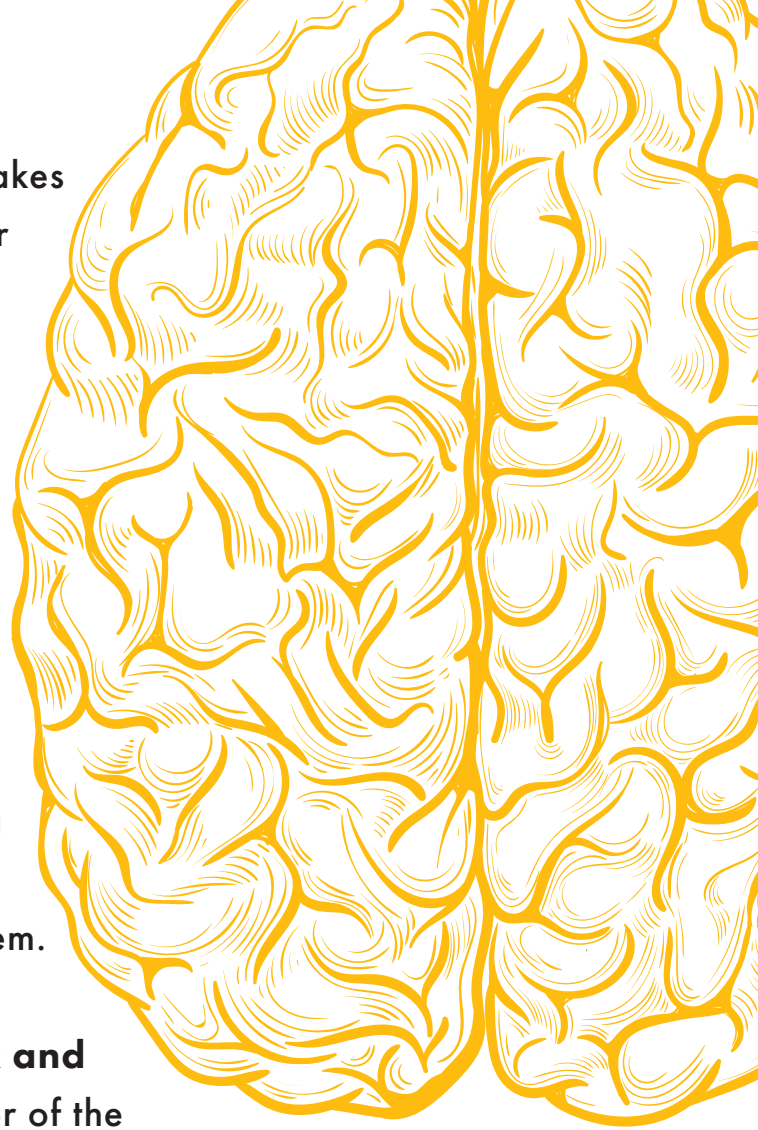
People open up to good listeners. Listening makes you a better friend, a better lover and a better conversationalist, especially as your spouse begins to sense you that you care.

**Let's face it: Listening isn't always easy** - especially with all the noise and distractions we have in our lives. Whether we're dealing with things like our own thoughts or feelings, responsibilities, comfort level, hunger, room temperature, or something else, we like to think we can listen to others and do something else at the same time. Plus, we've usually got something to say ourselves. But that's a problem.

Research shows that **we CANNOT multitask and listen well**. David Myers' work as the director of the Brain Cognition Lab at the University of Michigan makes it very clear that the brain does NOT multitask.

It may act in parallel functions (touch, sound, vision), but **when engaging in distinctly different tasks, the brain operates like a toggle switch jumping from one thing to another**. For example, you can't be looking at emails and listening to the love of your life talk about their day at the same time. **It's literally impossible.**

Ask yourself about the last three times you talked with your spouse. *Were you all there? Did you fully pay attention to your spouse while they were talking to you? If not, chances are you missed something.*



If you make a conscious effort to listen in order to understand, your relationship will reap the benefits. **Try these tips for being a better listener:**



**Focus.** Be attentive, look them in the eye and eliminate distractions. (Put. The. Technology. Far. Away.) Move elsewhere if necessary, but please don't fake attention. Don't just listen for facts and details, but listen for ideas, reasons and clues.



**Affirm your spouse's feelings** by empathizing with them. Dig a little deeper by saying things like, "You sound frustrated, excited, etc." "Mm-hmm," "I see," "Oh?" "Right," "And?" "Go on," "Tell me more."



**Don't interrupt or criticize**, but do ask for clarification if you don't understand something.



**Ask open-ended questions** that require more than yes or no answers. Use your partner's words, and/or paraphrase what they said to let them know you heard them. This can help you make sure you understand what they're saying. Take notes if it helps!



**Be conscious of how you're making someone else feel.** Look them in the eye and pay attention to what you're saying with your own body language.

**remember, there is no such thing as over-listening. You're not going to get it right all the time, but listening takes practice, and it's a worthwhile investment in your relationship**

# silence is golden...

EXCEPT WHEN IT ISN'T.

**S**ometimes, silence can be funny, as in awkward silence. Good silence can create space and give you both a little time to think about what you just heard. That's a huge positive.

**But the wrong kind of silence can damage relationships. Here's why.**

The silent treatment literally hurts. Research has shown that when you ignore or exclude your partner, it triggers the same area of the brain that is activated by physical pain, and **it can lead to emotional and physical problems** (not to mention problems in the bedroom). **This is true whether you are avoiding a conversation in person or refusing to answer a call, text or email.**

**“when you ignore or exclude your partner, it triggers the same area of the brain that is activated by physical pain...”**

Findings from Paul Schrodt's in-depth analysis of 74 relationship studies involving 14,000 participants revealed that the silent treatment is “tremendously” damaging to a relationship. It decreases relationship satisfaction for both partners, diminishes feelings of intimacy, and reduces your ability to communicate in a way that's healthy and meaningful.



The authors of *Crucial Conversations – Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High* suggest that **negative silence can be broken into three categories:**

**1 Masking:** Withholding the full truth of what you actually think. Sarcasm, sugar-coating and couching are some of the more popular forms.

**2 Avoiding:** Involves steering far away from sensitive subjects. We talk, but without addressing the real issues, and by sweeping them under the rug.

**3 Withdrawing:** Pulling out of a conversation altogether, either by exiting the conversation or leaving the room.

**If you find yourself using or dealing with negative silence as a pattern, make every effort to keep the peace talks open.**

But now let's say you're the fearful one who stays silent while your partner is begging you to talk... the longer you resist the conversation, avoid the topic or change the subject, the harder it will be for you to actually have the conversation when the "time is right." **Building up anxiety around the topic makes the conversation worse than it has to be.**

If you're the one receiving the silence, hang in there and be patient, but don't stop bringing it up. In other words, keep trying to have that conversation and **let your spouse know you're ready to talk about it when they're comfortable.** Don't pressure them or guilt them. **Acknowledge their apprehensiveness and maybe even ask them what you can do to make them more comfortable.**





**ON THE FLIP SIDE**, it can be good to stay silent in certain situations. For instance, if you're extremely angry and have a desire to respond out of frustration. Or, if you don't really know how to respond and need a few minutes to gather your thoughts. Sometimes, **it may even be best to stay silent if your partner is the one who is upset or uncertain.** This will give them time to think and figure out their own emotions before things escalate out of control.

**PRO TIP: if you're being silent on purpose, tell your spouse that you're choosing to be silent and why.**  
**Example: "I feel very upset by what you just told me, and I need a little time to process silently."**

# let their body do the talkin'

**W**hile talking and listening are important aspects of communication, **they're just the tip of the iceberg.** In fact, research shows that the majority of what we communicate is nonverbal. So no matter what words you are using, your actions really do speak louder than, and may even be more important than, your words.

**Nonverbal communication can do many things:** It can reinforce what is being said, or it can contradict what you are saying. It can reveal one's true emotional state. It can provide feedback to others. And, it can stop a conversation cold or cause a heated argument to boil over.

This means that posture, head motion, facial expression, eye contact and gestures ALL matter when we communicate.

For example, has anyone ever asked you if you're okay, but you're really not? **You say you're FINE, but you look all sad and totally NOT okay.** If so, you get the picture. You're saying one thing, but you mean another. An observant communicator will pick up on that and respond accordingly.

The thing is, **even if you say one thing, body language can give strong clues as to whether your words are true.** In fact, body language has the power to add to, subtract or modify the meaning of your words. The nonverbal actions are more instinctive in nature, and are generally better indicators of what is really going on. Even things like excessive blinking, furrowed brows, and squinting can indicate a disinterest or disgust in something.

**even if you say one thing, body language can show just how true your words are**

**So, how can you be more conscious of the body language you are sending? And how can you read others' body language?**

**Glad you asked.**

Developing emotional awareness about ourselves and others can make us better communicators. **An emotionally-aware person can read others more accurately.** They can also create trust and affirm the words they're speaking through nonverbal signals that affirm the words they speak. They also use nonverbal signals to respond to others appropriately, in a way that shows understanding, care and concern.

## **Tips for reading body language:**



**Pay attention** to whether words and actions match.



**Follow your instincts.** That gut feeling you have could be because you're picking up on inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal cues.



**What is their face showing?** (Also be aware of what their face is not showing, as if they're hiding something.)



**Is eye contact** conveying interest or disinterest?



**Is their tone** warm, confident and interested, or is it strained or deadpan?



**Is their posture** and shoulders relaxed or stiff?



**If touch is involved**, is it appropriate and comfortable or intimidating and hurtful?



**Are their arms crossed?** Do they seem like they're trying to be big/intimidating/overbearing?

# still need a little help decoding all those nonverbal cues?

HERE'S A LITTLE MORE...

## positive cues

**Mirroring:** Picking up on another's positive body language and copying it or reflecting it to indicate interest and approval

**Open posture** to communicate interest

**Friendly, regular eye contact**

**Respecting personal space**

**Leaning in** to understand

**A firm handshake**

**Nodding**

**Smiles**

**Hugs**

## negative cues

**Sweating**

**Frowning**

**Eye-rolling**

**Folded arms**

**Head-shaking**

**Controlling grip**

**Lip-biting or tightening**

**Clenched fists or tapping fingers**

**Minimal or tense facial expression**

**Constantly touching face, hair, mouth, nose**

**Body turned away, slumped and head downward**

**Unfriendly or threatening eye contact (also known as staring) or avoidance of eye contact**

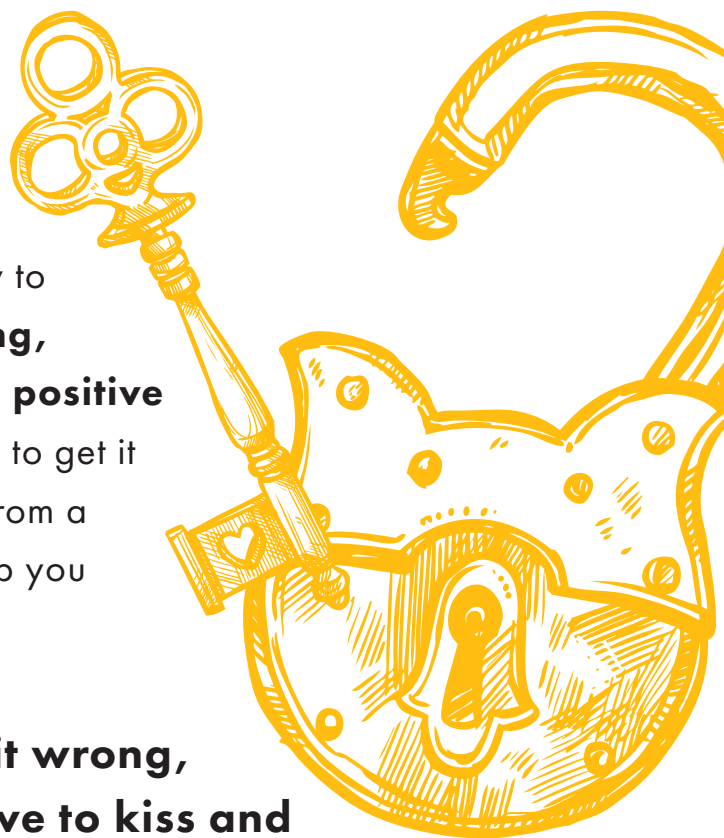
**Violating someone's personal space, especially after they've asked for more room**

**Closed posture, which communicates disinterest or fear (arms folded, crossed legs)**

**Fidgeting, shifting legs, picking at clothes or playing with pens or phones, doodling**

# all we're trying to say is...

**C**ommunication is a powerful thing, and how you express yourself each day to the one you promised forever to can give your marriage a boost or slowly erode intimacy. It really is the key to unlocking a healthy, happy marriage! **But talking, listening and responding to your mate in a positive way takes tons of practice,** and you're going to get it wrong plenty of times. You may even need help from a trusted counselor outside of your marriage to help you get it right, **AND THAT'S OK.**



**Just remember that when you do get it wrong, you should take every chance you have to kiss and make up!**

# every. single. time.

# thank you for reading!

We're here for you every step of the way.



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