

COMMUNICATION FOR COUPLES

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Have you “lost that loving feeling” in your relationship? Maybe it’s time to review some rules of good communication to help you get back on track again:

1. **Make “I statements” rather than “you statements”.** Say how you feel or how your partner’s actions affect you (e.g. say *“I felt hurt and angry when you came home late last night”* rather than *“You’re completely irresponsible, you don’t think about anybody but yourself”*).
2. **Ask for what you want,** instead of complaining about what you don’t want. (e.g. say *“Next time you think you’re going to be late for dinner, I’d like you to let me know so I’m not left wondering what happened – will you do that for me?”*)
3. **“Seek first to understand.”** (One of Steven Covey’s “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”.) Rather than starting a conversation by talking about what’s on your mind, invite your partner to share what’s on his or her mind first. Say *“I’d like to hear how you feel”* or *“what’s your perspective on this?”*
4. **Don’t interrupt** your partner when s/he is talking. And try actually listening to what your partner is saying, rather than simply thinking about what you’re going to say next!
5. If you can **“paraphrase” what your partner says,** then s/he will know that you have been listening (e.g. *“I hear you say that you feel . . . do I have it right?”*)
6. **Don’t “mind read”**, that is, don’t speculate about what your partner is thinking, feeling, or trying to do (e.g. *“You’re trying to make me feel guilty”*). By the same token, don’t expect your partner to know what you’re thinking or what you need.
7. **Stick to one topic at a time, and don’t store up complaints** (e.g. *“And another thing . . . and also . . . and why did you have to . . .?”*), or your partner will feel overwhelmed and overloaded with negativity.
8. **Don’t bring up resentments from the past** (unless it’s still a current issue). And try to **avoid getting sidetracked in an argument over irrelevant issues** (e.g. *“It happened in September.” “No, it was October.” “No, I distinctly remember it was September.”*)
9. **Avoid using “always” or “never”** (e.g. *“You never lift a finger around here”*). It invites your partner to focus on proving you wrong by listing the times s/he has lifted a finger. Be specific about what you want, e.g., *“I’d like it if you’d do the dishes tonight.”*
10. **Don’t label or name-call** (e.g. *“You’re just like your mother”* or *“You’re an idiot!”*).

Think of these as suggestions rather than absolute rules. Realistically, most people don’t and can’t practice these rules all of the time, nor will using them guarantee the success of your relationship. I’ve observed solid relationships in which the partners break all of these rules! But if you develop the habit of using at least some of these rules in your daily communication, your relationship will benefit.