

Managing Couple Communication

How can couples develop new ways of communicating?



Good communication is critical to a successful relationship. When we speak with our partner, communication can be easy, and we can feel loved, heard and understood. However sometimes communication is hard, and couples find they are not really listening to each other, discussions are going off track, or are ending up somewhere painful or unproductive. Good communication is a skill and takes practice, and you can improve the quality of conversation between you

What is an effective conversation?

Conversations can be useful and progress an issue if each partner:

- is willing to talk together about an issue or problem
- is ready to listen to their partner's point of view
- is willing to talk about how they see the relationship is going
- stays in the conversation and takes turns to talk, listen and respond
- sees and validates the other's experience and point of view
- is willing to make changes or compromises as a result of the conversation

What is the best preparation for having an effective conversation?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Openness to the other:** Am I ready to listen?
- **Active listening:** Can I listen intently, am I prepared to try to understand and see it from the other person's point of view?

- **Self-soothing:** Am I prepared to hear something that will hurt me? Scare me? Make me angry? Can I commit to managing my reactions by staying calm, waiting for my turn, breathing slowly and putting my feelings into words?
- **Self-disclosure:** Am I ready to speak of my own experience? To acknowledge that it is my perspective, how I see it? Have I thought about 'what do I want to say?' 'How do I want to say it?'
- **Willingness to change:** Am I open to changing how I see it after hearing from my partner?
- **Consideration:** can I commit to not blaming, attacking or threatening my partner? Can I carefully choose my words, so I don't do these things?
- **Commitment:** am I willing to remain in the conversation even though I feel overwhelmed, despairing, afraid, helpless? Am I able to disclose these feelings if I feel them?

While the following structure might feel false to do, it is to help couples who have developed bad habits to be very structured about change. Once you have learnt the principles and some new good habits, you can relax and be more natural with it.

The Structure: 5 Steps to managing a conversation and slowing it down

How to start a conversation:

- One person usually needs to initiate the conversation about the relationship: 'Can we make a time to talk about how we are going?'
- Give the other time to think, prepare themselves for the conversation
- Make a dedicated uninterrupted time.
- Need a private space... while walking together or while the kids are at school

1

Partner A (Speaks)

Talks about a concern or problem for a couple of minutes (about a paragraph worth). Uses 'I' statements. *'I am worried...I am sad about... I am upset about...I am wanting us to...'*

2

Partner B (Listens)

Responds and commences with 'What I hear you saying is...' and uses the other persons exact words as much as possible, repeating back to them what they have heard. Ideally, the listener also takes a guess at understanding partners' feelings. For example: 'you must be feeling disappointed and frustrated'

3

Partner A (Speaks)

Confirms or corrects the other persons accuracy and goes on to say more.

4

Speaking and Listening

Continue in the same way until partner A has finished conveying their main concern and feels accurately understood.

5

Switch roles. Partner B (new Speaker)

becomes the speaker. Partner B may respond to the issue raised previously by Partner A, as Partner B would have been waiting to have their say, while previously focusing on Partner A. Now it's Partner B's turn.

Rules of engagement in the structured conversation:

- No name calling, no blaming, no attacking.
- Stay in role, especially as the Listener.

Key messages for couples

- Effective conversations are ones in which each person tries to understand the point of view of the other person through active listening.
- If you try this and have an effective conversation, even if you don't completely succeed, you'll get 60-80% improvement over and above what you could have done without it.
- Effective conversations promote closeness, even if you don't see something eye to eye.
- Having effective conversations about difficult issues helps couples stay connected even if they can't completely resolve the difficult issue.

If you would like support to work on your communication, contact RANSW on **1300 364 277** to make an appointment.

1300 364 277

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