Resolving Conflict in Intimate Relationships

The Power of Perception
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Relationship problems often arise not because of what happens to us but because of how we explain what happens to us. This is a problem of perception.

Without a doubt, your partner does things that please you, things that puzzle you, things that annoy you, and things that probably anger you. And, like most people, you probably try to explain the reasons behind their behavior.

When we explain another person's intent or behavior towards us, all we have to base our judgment on is what we see or hear. We then filter that information through our own perceptual limitations – for example, our biases, our past experiences, our intentions. The result is an explanation that may have very little to do with the person's actual intent.

One way to tell the difference between distressed and stable relationships is by listening to the type of explanations that partners come up with for each other's behavior.

Consider these examples:

- He avoids me because he doesn't want to be with me.
- She nags so much because she's bossy.
- He brought me flowers because he loves me.
- He brought me flowers because he wants something.
- She argues with me because she's stubborn.
- He lost his job because his boss is a jerk.
- She was late because she got stuck in traffic.

Some of these explanations focus on an enduring characteristic of the other person (i.e. he doesn't want to be with me, she's bossy). Other explanations focus on situational or temporary causes (i.e. she got stuck in traffic, his boss is a jerk).

In relationships that are working well, partners are generous and not judgmental in their perceptions of each other. When things go well, they attribute this to internal and enduring traits or positive intentions. When things go wrong, they attribute this to changeable situations, or temporary setbacks, or external factors.

In contrast, partners in distressed relationships are less generous and more judgmental in their perceptions of each other. For example, when things go well, they attribute this to changeable situations or external factors and when things go wrong, they attribute this to internal and stable characteristics.

In the end, partners in relationships that work well tend to perceive each other in a positive, generous light. But partners in relationships that are distressed and not working well, are judgmental and do not give each other the benefit of the doubt.

When your partner does something that you don't like, what do you attribute their behavior to? Do you give them the benefit of the doubt or do you judge them and perceive their intentions as being negative and purposeful?
Session 4: Change your perception

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When you give credit or the benefit of the doubt where it’s due, your attributions about the root cause of other people’s behavior tend to look like this:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Positive Results</th>
<th>Negative Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>Caused by</td>
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<tr>
<td>• enduring, internal</td>
<td>• enduring, internal</td>
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<td>factors</td>
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<td>• sustained effort</td>
<td>• changeable, situational</td>
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<tr>
<td>• character</td>
<td>factors</td>
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<td>• positive intention</td>
<td>• chance</td>
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<td>• personality traits</td>
<td>• mood</td>
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<td>• competence</td>
<td>• impulsive decisions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• unintended, accidental</td>
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In contrast, when you withhold credit or the benefit of the doubt where it’s due, your attributions about the root cause of other people’s behavior tend to look like this:

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<tr>
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<td>• ulterior motives</td>
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<td>• emotional</td>
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<td>adjustment</td>
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Think of five positive things your partner has done lately in the relationship. Write them down in the left column. In the column on the right-hand side, write what you thought was the underlying reason for or origin of your partner’s behavior.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Positive things my partner did recently</th>
<th>Origin of my partner’s behavior</th>
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Now think of five negative things your partner has done lately that annoyed you. Write them down in the left column. On the right-hand side, write what you thought was the underlying reason for or origin of your partner’s behavior.

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<tr>
<th>Negative things my partner did</th>
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Now think of five things you have done lately in your relationship that are positive. Write them down in the left column. For each one, write the underlying reasons for or origins of your behavior on the right-hand side.

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<th>Positive things I have done lately</th>
<th>Origin of my behavior</th>
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Now think of five things you have done lately in your relationship that are negative. Write them down in the left column. For each one, write the underlying reasons for or origins of your behavior on the right-hand side.

<table>
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Now review what you have written and assess whether you tend to judge your partner by the same standards you judge yourself or by different standards. Are you as likely to give your partner the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong as you are for yourself? Are you as likely to give your partner credit when things go right as you are for yourself? Take a moment and jot down your answers to these questions and any other ideas that occurred to you from this exercise in the space below.

Based on what you have learned so far and what you know about yourself, use the following scale to rate how well you give yourself credit or the benefit of the doubt and how well you do the same for your partner.

1. How fair am I to myself when I evaluate my negative behavior?

   Not very fair 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very fair
   I put myself down. I assume the worst about myself. I focus on my deficiencies.  
   I try to be balanced. I don’t beat myself up. I try to take situational factors, not just personal, into account.

2. How fair am I to myself when I evaluate my positive behavior?

   Not very fair 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very fair
   I discount my efforts. I don’t give myself credit. I attribute my successes to situational causes outside of my control.  
   I give myself credit where it’s due. I acknowledge my efforts, strengths, and successes easily.

3. How fair am I to my partner when I evaluate my partner’s negative behavior?

   Not very fair 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very fair
   I put him/her down. I assume the worst intentions. I take things personally. I focus on his/her deficiencies.  
   I try to be balanced. I try to take situational factors into account. I try to give him/her the benefit of the doubt.
4. How fair am I to my partner when I evaluate my partner’s positive behavior?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I discount my partner’s efforts. I don’t give him/her credit. I assume he/she didn’t mean it or was lucky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I give him/her full credit where it’s due. I acknowledge his/her efforts, strengths, and successes easily.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If any of your ratings in response to the four questions above are less than 10, what could you begin to do to improve? Write down three specific things you plan to do.

1. 
2. 
3. 

Check your perception

Now let’s look at the powerful influence of perception when it comes to explaining the actions of others (i.e. one’s partner).

You might have noticed that the word “check” has a double meaning here. It means that you need to develop the habit of examining your perceptions to see if they are accurate or fair. It also means that you need to keep your perceptions “in check” so that they don’t cause problems in your relationship.

This exercise is meant to help you learn to challenge your perceptions. The idea is to ask yourself, “What else could this situation mean? How else could I explain it?” Read the following short statement describing what happened to Candice and Greg. Underneath that statement on the left is how Candice interpreted the situation. On the right is an alternative explanation.

What happened

Candice: Greg is always going off and doing his own thing or working long hours at his job. He rarely comes home to help me anymore. He leaves me to do all of the housework and to look after the kids.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My explanation</th>
<th>Alternative explanation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greg is selfish and irresponsible. He just expects me to do everything.</td>
<td>We’ve been fighting a lot. Our home life isn’t much of a refuge. Maybe he isn’t coming home because he doesn’t want to fight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now imagine yourself in the next situation. Read the statement describing what happened. Underneath the statement is how you might have initially interpreted what happened. In the space to the right, write an alternative explanation. What else could your partner’s behavior have meant?

What happened

We were at a dinner party with my mother and step-father. My mother can be hard to get along with. She has strong opinions about things and insists on being right. My partner got into an argument with her. It was over something trivial. My partner wouldn’t back down and their argument got heated. My mother is capable of not talking for months when she’s mad, so I asked my partner to stop being unreasonable and I got yelled at later that I wasn’t being supportive.

My explanation

My partner is stubborn and won’t make sacrifices for me.

Alternative explanation

The next two situations are blank. Use your own situations for your relationship. Describe a situation that has occurred in your relationship. How did you interpret it? What is an alternative explanation?

What happened

My explanation

Alternative explanation
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What happened

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If you find it difficult to come up with an alternative explanation, use the following questions to help you:

- Do you know what your partner’s objective or goal was at that moment?
- Do you know how your partner was feeling at the time?
- How was your partner’s behavior related to one of his or her strengths?
- What has your partner told you in the past about being in this kind of situation?
- What might be a positive intention that would explain your partner’s behavior?
- What would you have suggested if a friend had told about this scenario instead?
- What is a more positive, helpful way of thinking about this situation?
About emotional and physical arousal

When conflict begins, many people get anxious and they experience signs of physiological arousal.

For example, you may experience any of these signs of anxiety and arousal:

- Your heart races
- Your breathing becomes more shallow or you hold your breath
- You tense your muscles
- You feel overwhelmed and just want to leave
- You feel an urge to strike back and hurt your partner
- You think only negative things about your partner
- You may not be able to remember what the argument was about.
- The most notable problem with feeling upset and physiologically aroused during conflict is that your ability to think clearly becomes impaired. For example, as you become more anxious and upset, it becomes more difficult to:
  - take in new information
  - reflect on what that information means to you and your partner
  - to weigh the consequences of what you say and do
  - or to override your habitual patterns of responding
- You cannot afford to be reactive or careless when you are in conflict with your partner. The six-step strategy in this session will help soothe yourself, and your partner, so that you can keep your anxiety under control, and keep your mind on resolving your conflict in a healthy and positive way.
Change your reaction

When conflict begins, many people get anxious and they experience signs of physiological arousal. For example, you may experience any of these signs of anxiety and arousal:

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- Weigh the consequences of what you say and do
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Signs of arousal, anxiety, and upset

Think carefully about how you respond in a heated argument. What do you notice in your body (i.e. physical symptoms or sensations) that suggests you are becoming anxious/upset/overwhelmed?

What do you notice in your thinking that suggests you are becoming anxious/upset/overwhelmed?

Think carefully about how your partner responds in a heated argument. What are some signs you have noticed that your partner is becoming anxious/upset/overwhelmed?

What did you notice about your behavior?
The six steps of effective ‘time out’

Step 1: Retreat
When you are feeling overwhelmed with angry emotions, suggest upfront as calmly as possible that you need a break to calm down and think. You might find it useful to develop non-verbal signals to indicate when you feel the need to cool off.

Don’t storm away angrily. As awkward as it may feel, try to agree with your partner on a time-frame for the break. Generally, 20 minutes is sufficient to return your body’s physiology to a normal resting state, but you may feel you need a longer time to reflect. If so, agree on a time when you will resume the discussion.

Note: try to avoid leaving the house dramatically every time your arguments escalate. Such actions typically heighten your partner’s anxiety about your frame of mind, making it difficult for him or her to calm down. In most cases, removing yourself to another room in the house or going for a walk is sufficient. The exception is if your argument has turned violent or threatens to turn violent.

Exercise:
Take a moment now and reflect on what you might say or do to signal that you need a time-out. Be specific and write down your ideas in the space provided below. They should be doable for you. For example:

- “I can’t think. I need a break to sort through my thoughts.”
- “I think we are getting too heated. Let’s go away and calm down so we can talk about it better.”
- “I need to go for a walk and clear my head. I’ll be right back.”

Step 2: Relax
When you are alone, use the time to soothe yourself physically. When you are feeling anxious or tense your muscles become clenched and your breathing becomes shallow. You need to consciously work on relaxing your body. Take some time now to practice relaxing.

Instructions
Sit comfortably in your chair and take deep, even breaths through your nose or mouth. Inhale slowly and evenly (don’t gulp air) counting slowly to four, focusing on pushing air down to the bottom of your lungs. Send the air down as low as you can so that you feel your abdomen expanding. Then pause for a moment. Then slowly and evenly exhale through your mouth to the count of four. As you let go, feel your body relaxing. Let your muscles become heavy and relaxed.

If you feel yourself becoming lightheaded, stop and breathe normally for 30 seconds, and then start again.

Focus your attention on your breathing. Let your mind clear. With each inhale, focus on the sensation of your lungs filling with air and your abdomen expanding. With each exhale, focus on letting your shoulders and neck muscles relax, and say the words, “Relax” or “Be calm” in your mind.

As you relax, while you are breathing deeply, you can begin to focus on relaxing each muscle group in your body. You might start by tightening your fists and arms and holding the tension for ten seconds, then letting them completely relax. Let the tension flow out your arms like liquid. Focus on consciously letting your muscles relax, letting them become heavy and warm.

Tighten the muscles in your shoulders and head, holding the tension for ten seconds, then let them completely relax. Let the tension flow out of your shoulders and head like liquid.

Roll your head around on your neck in a complete circle, first in one direction then another. Focus on letting your neck and shoulders relax, letting them drop lower and imagining them becoming warm and heavy.

Then tighten your stomach and lower back muscles (careful not to tighten them too much), holding the tension for a few seconds, and then let them relax. Feel your muscles becoming heavy and warm.
Tighten your leg muscles and hold the tension for ten seconds, then let them relax completely. Let the tension flow of your legs like liquid; feel them becoming heavy and relaxed.

Become aware of any area of tension in your body and consciously focus on relaxing that area, letting it become heavy, and imagining it becoming warm.

By now, you should be feeling much more relaxed and warm throughout your body. You will have begun an important step in soothing yourself. The next step is to release all of the negative thoughts that you might be ruminating on in your mind.

**Step 3: Release**

One mistake that partners make when they break off dialogue with each other is that they continue rehearsing in their mind negative thoughts and images about the situation or the other person. For example:

- “I don’t have to take this.”
- “This is so unfair.”
- “I don’t deserve to be treated that way.”
- “There is no use talking to her.”
- Planning how to retaliate or punish your partner

Such angry thoughts and images become fuel for staying angry; withdrawing from the argument has become another way to carry on the war.

The key is to let go of these toxic thoughts and images and clear your mind. This is typically done in combination with relaxing your body. Here are some methods of releasing those hot thoughts.

**Soothing Self-Talk**

You can talk to yourself in a way that helps you calm down by rehearsing calming soothing statements in your mind instead of hostile ones.

Examples:

- “Okay, just calm down. Take some deep breaths. Easy does it. Don’t get riled up over this.”
- “I’m probably overreacting. I need to give him the benefit of the doubt. I need to remember all the good things that my partner does for me. My partner is probably doing the best he or she can in the situation.”
- “I’ve been irritable lately. This situation really bugged me, but I can handle it. I just need to be more careful about what I say.

Write down some self-soothing statements you could rehearse in your mind instead of hostile thoughts, the next time you are in an argument.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

**Step 4: Reflect**

Now, once you have soothed yourself and you feel calmer, it is time to shift your attention to what your part in the problem was and what you can do to improve things. If you can, it is also important that you try and think about how the situation might have looked from your partner’s eyes.

To help you begin the process of self-reflection, here are a few important questions to consider asking yourself:
1. How have I been acting lately toward my partner?

2. How would I have felt if I were in my partner’s shoes?

3. What feelings did I have that I was not communicating?

4. What needs do I have that I was not communicating?

5. What was my part in the problem?

6. What might I do differently to start to make things better?

**Step 5: Return**

Once you are ready to assume responsibility for your part in the problem and for being part of the solution, the next step is to return to re-connect with your partner. The key is to return to the relationship and to your partner, not just the issue. This means that you return with:

- A willingness to apologize
- A softened heart toward your partner
- A desire to reconnect
- A desire to validate your partner
- A different view of the situation
- A willingness to take responsibility for yourself

Chances are your partner will notice these changes in you and will not respond the same way as before. More importantly, having made these changes in yourself, you will not likely respond the same way as before. Therefore, you won’t be returning to the same old fight.
**Step 6: Repair**

The final step is to make an effort to repair any damage done to the relationship. There are several ways to repair the relationship. For example, you might:

- Apologize
- Reassure your partner of your love and respect
- Explain what you believe your part in the problem was
- Validate your partner’s feelings

Note: In most situations, the first thing you should do is apologize. Apologizing doesn’t mean admitting that your views were wrong and your partner was right. It means taking responsibility for your part in the interaction that caused you and your partner to escalate things.

Sometimes after this calming down period, partners realize that what they were fighting about was trivial. Neither partner may feel the need to resume the disagreement at that point. In such cases, however, an apology or an acknowledgment of any hurts caused in the process of the earlier argument is still necessary. You still need to repair any damage to the relationship.

You may also realize that what you were fighting about was not the real issue, and shift the focus of your discussion to the more central issue.
Change your intent

A distinction that couples often fail to make is between the intent of what they are communicating and the impact of what they are communicating.

When you communicate with your partner, you do so with a certain intent. For example:

• “I intend to strengthen my marriage.”
• “I intend to be less defensive with my spouse.”
• “I intend for you to feel loved and appreciated.”

Impact refers to the result of your communication. How your partner receives your message.

When you send a message with a specific intent and your partner receives that message in the way that you intended, you are communicating effectively.

When you send a message with a specific intent, but your partner receives that message differently than you intended, you are not communicating effectively.

In the end, when your intentions don't match your impact, there will be misunderstanding and perhaps conflict.

Example:

Mark has the intention of enjoying a pleasant night out with Claire at a dinner party.

His immediate intention is to arrive at the party feeling relaxed and not rushed or being late.

So Mark shouts at Claire “we need to leave in five minutes.”

Claire, on the other hand, wants a worry-free evening. Her intent is to ensure that everything is prepared for the babysitter.

But when Claire hears Mark shout “we need to leave in five minutes” she feels annoyed. She perceives that Mark would rather shout at her to hurry up than ask her what he could do to help her so they can leave sooner.

So Claire shouts back at Mark “I’m going as fast as I can” and she gives him the cold shoulder during the entire dinner party.

In this example, both Mark and Claire wanted a pleasant night out. But what they got was a night filled with tension and distance.

Neither of them had initial negative intent, but the way they perceived each other’s message and the way they acted on those perceptions, set the stage for a disastrous evening.

Remember you are always communicating a message. So you must try to take into account not only the intent of your message but also the impact of your message.
Exercise

A distinction that couples often fail to make is between the intent of what they are communicating and the impact of what they are communicating.

Remember:

If you are impacted negatively by your partner:

- Remind yourself that the way you feel does not necessarily reflect your partner’s intent. Just because you feel hurt or rejected, doesn’t mean that your partner’s intent was to hurt or reject.
- Accept the possibility that you are misinterpreting the message. It doesn’t mean that your feelings are invalid or any less real, but it does mean you have to take responsibility for the fact that these feelings may be reflecting where you are at personally.
- State your positive intention for moving forward. State what you want to happen differently instead of what you wish would stop.

If your intent is being taken the wrong way:

- Remind yourself that the meaning of any communication lies in how it is received. If your partner attaches a specific meaning to what you have said or done then accept that your partner’s feelings are real and stop trying to talk him or her out of them.
- Accept that you may need to change your approach. In the end, it doesn’t really matter if your intent was innocent or positive. If you are not getting the results you intend, then you may need to adjust your behavior so that you do get your intended message across.

If your intent is negative, you can change this by:

- Rising above your impulses (choosing to be proactive not reactive).
- Reminding yourself that your negative intent will harm your relationship, your partner, and you. Everyone loses.
- Asking yourself whether your immediate intent matches with your overall wants and needs for the relationship.
Think of a recent situation where you felt falsely accused of a negative intent. Describe the situation and describe what you did that upset your partner. Then write down how it impacted your partner. Then write down what your positive intent actually was (there might have been more than one). Then write down what you could have done instead or what you need to do differently now so that your partner understands your true intent.

**Situation:**

**What I did:**

**How it impacted my partner:**

**What my intent actually was:**

**What could I have done or what could I do next time to ensure that my intent matches the impact of my message:**

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**Assume goodwill**

In the absence of a long history of mutual hurts and rejection, people rarely set out in relationships to intentionally hurt each other. Therefore, when you get hurt, instead of looking for ways that your partner meant ill will or malice toward you, make the assumption that your partner has overall goodwill toward you. Realize that your partner does not likely wake up each morning planning ways to make your day miserable.

Even when your partner behaves badly, try to think of positive intentions that might have motivated that behavior. Try to think of your partner as doing his or her best to deal with a difficult situation in the best way he or she knows how at the moment, even when the outcome is negative for you.

There may be times when your partner does hold ill will against you, particularly if there has been a long history of hostile, destructive conflict in the relationship that has weakened the friendship over time. Even in these cases, however, the ill will usually arises in the moment, masking the deeper positive intentions that lie in a more vulnerable, and fiercely guarded place underneath.
List three things your partner has done lately that you found annoying or that you took personally. (Any actions that were clearly motivated by negative intent – such as verbal abuse – should not be used for this exercise). Next to each one, write down three positive intentions that might have motivated your partner's actions, and that you had not thought of at the time.

**Example**

My wife told me to calm down and stop yelling when I was disciplining the kids.

1. ________________________________
   a. To maintain harmony.
   b. To preserve my relationship with my kids.
   c. To remind me to stay calm.

2. ________________________________
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

3. ________________________________
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

Make a list of five things your partner has done lately in the relationship that might be seen as evidence of his or her general goodwill toward you.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
Expand your vision

You need to open space for your partner to make changes without having you discount them or ignore them, just because you had to ask for them or just because you’re not sure they will last. Any changes your partner makes will only help if you acknowledge them. This noticing-of-change is actually a crucial ingredient in starting the virtuous cycle we mentioned in session two.

Make a list of five things your partner has done recently that you appreciate or admire.

Write down three things about your partner that have annoyed you lately. Below each one, write down the positive aspect of that characteristic. Then write down two examples of how that positive aspect has benefited you or your family. Just like every coin has two sides, every personal strength has its corresponding weakness. Sometimes we spend so much energy focusing on what we don’t like, that we forget to appreciate the strengths that we found attractive to begin with.

Something that annoys me about my partner:

Corresponding strength:

Example 1:

Example 2:

Something that annoys me about my partner:

Corresponding strength:

Example 1:

Example 2:

Something that annoys me about my partner:

Corresponding strength:

Example 1:

Example 2:
Change your behavior

Psychologist John Gottman has spent 20 years studying what makes marriages and relationships last. According to his research, there is an optimal ratio of 5:1 positive to negative communication behaviors in relationships that are stable and happy. That is, when happy, stable couples communicate with each other about an issue, for every instance of negativity (such as raising one’s voice, stating a complaint, or expressing one’s anger), you would find at least five instances of positive expressions (such as expressing appreciation, affirmation, physical affection, compliments, listening, validating the other person, etc.).

By contrast, among couples who are heading toward divorce, this ratio is just under one to one. For every negative interaction there is less than one positive interaction.

In addition, John Gottman found a consistent pattern of particularly damaging negative interactions that, if made a habit, were key predictors of divorce. These were:

1. Criticism.
2. Outward displays of contempt for each other (e.g. swearing at each other, sarcasm).
3. Defensiveness. This means not admitting one’s role in the marriage problems
4. Stonewalling. Stubbornly refusing to give your partner any verbal or nonverbal feedback, like your partner was talking to a stone wall.

In other words, it is not the presence or absence of conflict that leads to divorce. Instead, it is the presence of hostility and negativity in your communication, particularly in how you handle your disagreements.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criticism</th>
<th>Complaint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are a treat! You think you can just go out with your buddies all of the time and leave me at home and I'm going to be happy and greet you with a kiss the next day. Selfish pig!</td>
<td>You leave me at home alone with the kids frequently and don't come home until early morning. I don't feel like we are a partnership. I want us to be together.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Try turning these criticisms into a complaint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criticism</th>
<th>Complaint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All you ever do is nag. You are never satisfied with anything I do around here.</td>
<td>Why are you so self-centered? All through the party you talked only of yourself. Our guests were getting bored.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You always have to interfere with me and the kids, don't you? I hate the way you undermine me when I'm disciplining them.
**Turn Contempt into Caring**

The alternative to contempt is to cultivate a genuine concern for your partner’s well-being and a willingness to show respect for your partner. Session 5 on changing your intent provides tools that address this issue.

**Turn Defensiveness into Accountability**

Learn to accept responsibility for your role in the relationship problems. As we have discussed, both of you play a part in co-creating your relationship difficulties. Learn to apologize when you hurt your partner, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Try to become aware of defensive language you are using. Examples of defensive language includes:

- Yes, but …
- What about when you …
- No, that’s not true …
- I don’t think so …
- At least I’m not …
- That’s ridiculous …
- I won’t accept that …
- You are one to talk …

In the spaces below, write down other examples of defensive language that you use:

The following questions are designed to help you explore the barriers to taking responsibility and what you might do to overcome these barriers. Write your answers in the space provided.

1. How hard is it for me to admit when I have injured my partner, even unintentionally?

2. What is it that stops me from taking responsibility for impacting my partner negatively? What am I afraid will happen if I were not to defend myself?

3. Where does this fear come from?
4. Assume for a moment that this fear might be invalid. How might this fear be invalid?

5. What are some of my favorite ways of becoming defensive?

6. What happens in our relationship when I insist on being defensive with my partner?

7. What could I do instead of being defensive?

Consider that it takes a great deal of energy to continually deflect perceived attacks. The more you defend and deflect, the more frustrated your partner becomes, the harder your partner tries to get his or her point across, perhaps in increasingly aggravated and extreme ways, and the more you feel the need to defend.

In the end, it takes much less time and energy to simply admit your role in the conflict and then move on toward solutions.

**Turn Stonewalling into Engagement**

The alternative to stonewalling is to re-engage with your partner. This is best accomplished when your partner has also become less critical and hostile with you in raising concerns. We have already discussed strategies for re-engaging with your partner in previous sessions. For example, review session 3 on de-escalating conflict through soothing or taking a time-out.

**Four Conditions for Effective Communication**

Effective communication is not so much about learning specific techniques, although these will be discussed next, as it is about cultivating certain foundational attitudes and virtues in yourself that guide how you treat your partner. These foundational attitudes and virtues are as follows:

1. **Deep concern for the well-being of your partner.**

   Strong relationships thrive when those in the relationship feel a deep level of caring and concern for each other’s well-being. There are many definitions of love, but one definition is when your partner’s happiness is so important to you that you are willing to make sacrifices and expend effort to nurture your partner’s well-being.

   How am I doing in this area? Does my partner’s well-being matter to me?
2. Respect for your partner.

Respect is an essential foundation for positive communication. Showing respect means demonstrating high regard for another person's dignity and for the validity of their existence in the world. That means you carefully guard against sending any message that communicates, “You are invisible,” or “You are nothing,” or “Your feelings and thoughts don't matter.”

Exercise: How am I doing in this area? What do I need to work on to improve?

3. Willingness to try and understand your partner’s point of view.

You must be willing to set aside your own agenda and work at seeing things from your partner’s point of view. You need to keep an open mind and open heart.

Exercise: How am I doing in this area? What do I need to work on to improve?

4. Willingness to be open about your thoughts and feelings.

Finally, you must be willing to share your thoughts and feelings with your partner. Intimacy requires two people to be fully involved in sharing the deeper parts of themselves with each other.

Exercise: How am I doing in this area? What do I need to work on to improve?

Communicating From the Heart

The following five principles can help you and your partner to improve your communication with each other. As you read through each one, take careful stock of yourself and assess how well you are doing in each area.

1. Listen to Understand

If you only remembered one thing from this session about communication, it ought to be the importance of genuine listening for the purpose of coming to understand your partner. Listening to understand your partner is different from listening to yourself while your partner talks, or listening to your partner so that you can point out what's wrong or illogical in your partner’s statements.

Here are ten common listening mistakes. See if you recognize yourself in any of them.
When my partner and I are having a disagreement, I tend to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>行为描述</th>
<th>不做</th>
<th>偶尔做</th>
<th>经常做</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Rehearse my next point in my thoughts while my partner is talking instead of really listening to my partner</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Focus on what is “wrong” with what my partner is saying, instead of common ground</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Not pay attention (i.e. looking away, watching T.V.)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Interrupt my partner when he or she is talking</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Give no verbal or non-verbal assurance that I am actually listening (i.e. head nods, mm-hmm)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Talk too much</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Not acknowledge what my partner has just said (i.e. by switching topics, or by deflecting the focus away from me)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Talk over top of my partner</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you notice yourself making any of these mistakes a lot in your listening, then make a decision to work on changing them in the future. Here are some tips for helping you to improve your listening:

- Give your partner your full attention.
- Make eye contact, turn your body toward your partner.
- Focus on your partner’s message. Stop thinking about your rebuttal, or what you are going to say next, and really listen.
- Acknowledge verbally and non-verbally that your partner’s story matters to you (head nods, “um hmm”, “go on,” “tell me more”).
- Ask open-ended questions to clarify anything that you do not understand. Ask questions sparingly, however, as even open-ended questions may be distracting to the speaker or may steer the conversation in a direction that the speaker was not intending to go.

2. Find Common Ground

Find some way to agree with what your partner is saying. There will always be some truth in your partner’s words. When you don’t acknowledge this truth, you are at least being defensive, if not dishonest. You might ask, what if I don’t agree with my partner? Then do one of the following:

- Find some grain of truth in their words, or
- Agree in principle with the other person’s concerns (you may not agree with specific details of the situation but don’t get sidetracked with details), or
- At the very least, acknowledge the truth of the other person's feelings based on their perception or view of the situation.
Instead of focusing on the part of the other person’s message that you don’t agree with, focus on the part you can agree with.

For example:

- “Yes, actually it was insensitive of me.”
- “You’re right, I wasn’t thinking.”
- “You’ve got good reason to feel angry with me.”
- “I can see why you feel so upset.”

By letting go of your need to defend, explain, or justify your behavior, you offer nothing for your partner to resist. The effect may not be immediate, but eventually you will invite your partner to stop being hostile, and to interact differently with you. Your partner can’t fight with you if you refuse to fight back.

3. Show that You Understand

Communicate that you understand and care about your partner’s feelings and what he or she is saying. One way to do this is to communicate your understanding of your partner’s world verbally. For example, you might say, “So what you are saying is that you feel hurt when I don’t include you in my decisions.”

Pay attention to key words your partner uses. Words are symbols for people’s experience; they have unique meaning to the person. Try not to change their words into your words too much.

For example:

- “I can see that you feel trapped and overwhelmed (your partner’s words). I probably would too if I were in your shoes.”
- “I hear that you feel unappreciated (your partner’s word) and would like me to pay attention to you more. Is that right?”

4. Talk Straight About Your Feelings

Strive first to listen to your partner and understand your partner’s perspective. When you and your partner are satisfied that you have listened fully, then you can take the floor to describe your perspective.

State your underlying thoughts and feelings in a direct, respectful, and straightforward way. One technique that may help in this case is to use “I-messages” instead of “You-messages.” This means that you talk about what you see, what you want in the relationship, what your thoughts are, what the impact of your partner’s behavior on you is, and what your perceptions and interpretations are.

For example:

- “I want us to get along better.”
Here you are talking about your desire.

- “When you ignored me, I felt rejected and alone.”
Here you are talking about how your partner’s observed behavior affected you.

- “I was getting frustrated.”
Here you are talking about your feelings.
“You-messages” are when you tell your partner what his feelings are, or how she must have been interpreting things, or what he wants, or the kind of person she is.

For example:

- “You just want to have your way all of the time.”
  Here you are talking about what you assume your partner’s desire is, not your desire.
- “You are such a jerk.”
  Here you are accusing your partner of having bad character.
- “You don’t like it when I assert myself.”
  Here you are talking about how your partner interprets and is impacted by your behavior.

I-statements help you avoid coming across as though you are the chief expert on your partner’s world, and thus reduce the likelihood that your partner will become defensive.

Here is a suggested model for using “I-messages.”

- When you (state specific behavior that you observed),
- I feel (or felt) (state the emotion you have/had).
- I think I feel that way because (state your interpretation or how you perceived it).
- What I would like is (state what you would like to have happen instead).

Note that the downfall with this strategy is in trying to apply technique without changing your heart or intent. A true “I-message” is born more from your intent than from the specific words you use. Sometimes “I-messages” are really “You-messages” in disguise. Your words may follow the form outlined above, but if you haven’t changed your ill-intent then your negative meaning will shine through the veneer of technique.

For example, consider the husband who says, “I feel like I’m the only one around here with any sense.” Is he stating his own interpretation? Yes. Is it technically an “I-message”? Yes. Is his partner likely to take it as an attack? You bet. Was it meant as an attack? Very likely.
Exercise: Using “I-messages”
Here are some examples of “You-messages.” See if you can turn them into “I-messages.” The first one is done for you.

Example 1:
PROBLEMATIC: “You are so lazy. All you ever think about is yourself.”
INSTEAD TRY: “When you leave your clothes lying around, I feel unimportant and overwhelmed with what has to be done in the house. I just can’t do it all myself.”

Example 2:
PROBLEMATIC: “You just want to keep your thumb on me all of the time. You are just like your mother.”

Example 3:
PROBLEMATIC: “You don’t even care how I feel. I could get diagnosed with cancer tomorrow and you’d come home and ask me what’s for dinner.”

Example 4:
PROBLEMATIC: “You jerk, you left me standing there for an hour!”

5. Learn to Soothe Your Partner
In the section on self-soothing, we discussed using a time-out to stop the destructive interaction long enough to calm down and reflect. There are other ways of soothing yourself and your partner during the conflict interaction, however, to help keep it from escalating. Each of the four communication skills we have described in the preceding sections will help to soothe yourself and your partner. In addition, consider the use of physical touch and affection, offering words of affirmation and appreciation, and slowing things down.

Physical Touch
Often couples who are arguing with each other maintain physical distance between themselves. They avoid touching each other. They stay at opposite sides of the room. This is most likely a natural manifestation of the emotional distance the conflict is creating. One way to slow things down is to maintain physical contact. Hold hands. Touch your partner’s knee or arm. Move closer to your partner.
Offer Reassuring Words

Words have a power to hurt and a power to heal. Speak kind words to each other even during a disagreement. Avoid harsh words (i.e. swearing, name-calling). You may think it makes you feel better to vent at your partner, or to hurt your partner as much as you have felt hurt by using harsh words. But remember that words have power. The negative effect of harsh words is hard to erase, and words cannot be recalled once said.

Maya Angelou a prominent African-American writer, talks about the power of words to hurt and to heal. As a little girl she was sexually abused by a man in her hometown; she told the townspeople what had happened and the people murdered the man. She was mute for seven years afterward because she felt she had killed her perpetrator by the power of her voice (cited in Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996).

She reminds us that words have a way of lodging in the walls, lodging in hearts, lodging in cells. Words are often not forgotten. Make sure that the words settling in the walls of your home, and in your partner’s heart and in your partner’s cells are words of kindness, and affirmation, and affection.

Here are some examples of reassuring statements that might help to keep you and your partner on track during an argument.

- “I know I’m sounding angry, but I’m really not angry at you.”
- “You have a right to feel the way you do. It’s hard for me to understand, but I am trying.”
- “You have a point about that.”
- “I can see why you feel that way.”
- “I have a lot of respect for you.”
- “Help me to understand.”
- “This is hard for me, but I’m trying.”

Slow Things Down

Arguments can escalate out of control very quickly, within minutes. One of the best ways to prevent this escalation is to slow things down by

- not being reactive,
- holding your tongue and thinking before you speak,
- speaking slowly
- speaking only one at a time
- reminding yourself that not objecting to your partner’s viewpoint is not the same as agreeing to it
- reflecting on the following questions: “How am I feeling? How am I impacting my partner? How is my partner feeling? How am I coming across?”

Write in any other suggestions you might have that work for you in slowing down your interactions with each other:

1.
2.
3.
4.