

Our Relationship... And Communicating Effectively

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This NebGuide is one in a series of six addressing the personal and working relationships between family members.

Effective communication requires a two-way commitment. As a partner you have the responsibility to communicate with your mate. Your partner also has a responsibility to communicate with you. Communicating effectively with your partner does not come easily and without practice. It takes a sincere effort by both partners. Both partners must love and respect each other and want to nurture their relationship.

Sharing Feelings and Listening

Communicating effectively means being willing to share your feelings and being honest and sincere with what you say. It means caring about the other person when you talk together. You should not have to keep your feelings hidden because you are worried about what might happen when you express yourself.

Communicating effectively also means being a good listener. You do not always need to be the one talking. You must be willing to hear about your partner's day, feelings, opinions, concerns or whatever is being discussed. Partners who care about each other and desire effective communication will avoid words that put their partner down, ridicule, poke fun at or demean in any way. They also avoid negative voice tones and negative facial and body gestures.

You communicate in many nonverbal ways. Positive facial and body gestures such as smiles, hugs or gentle touches will tell your partner how much you care.

Managing Conflict

Couples who wish to communicate effectively will be interested in learning ways to manage conflict. Some conflict in a partnership is normal and healthy. It is not so much the presence of quarreling that is the problem in relationships, but rather the presence of defensiveness, hostility, stubbornness and withdrawal. Inflexibility also threatens the stability of marital

interaction. Partners wanting to strengthen their relationship will be flexible and look at a variety of options to deal with a problem or compromise. They will recognize problems and validate or acknowledge their partners' feelings, opinions and ideas. This does not mean that all problems will be resolved or you will always agree with your partner, but it does imply that mutual respect is present in the relationship. Simply, a partner will care about the feelings, opinions and ideas of the other without losing a sense of personhood.

Positive Exchange

Couples who get along well engage in more positive validation sequences where a problem is followed by a positive reaction or when something good receives a positive response. Positive behavior usually is prominent in couples where friendship, love and respect are present. Strong couples will experience conflict, but it is not threatening to the foundation of their relationship. They are able to examine some of the major issues which may harm the marriage if not appropriately considered.

Emotional Responses are OK

Core issues in a marriage, such as separateness and connectedness, vary with development and a family's life cycle. For example, the issues for newlyweds will be different than those for new parents, parents of teenagers or retirees. Some issues are "cool" and others are "hot" and may evoke emotional responses with tears or raised voices and blood pressure. Expressing emotions is an appropriate way to handle difficult issues and should not be an excuse to ignore problems or avoid conflict. There may be times, however, when it is more appropriate to raise sensitive issues. For instance, if you are both tired or a child is sick, you may want to set another time for the discussion.

Make Important Decisions Together

In more significant matters, couples must communicate during the decision-making process, and not only to inform the

other partner that a decision already has been made. Couples will want to set boundaries for minor things that can be decided by an individual partner and other things that should be discussed together before making a decision. For many couples buying groceries, repairing the car and disciplining the children might be something one person does independently. But at times, there are circumstances that warrant working together on similar decisions. For example, you may want to talk with your partner if the car is needing costly repairs or if a child is in trouble at school.

It is important to be open about issues, problems and occurrences, and not keep secrets from each other. There is, of course, some controversy about how much needs to be shared with a partner. Some feel it is OK to withhold some information or keep some things private, especially if it is felt to be insignificant. Others feel there should be no secrets between intimate partners. Each couple must determine their level of connectness. If you want to be treated with mutual respect and be trusted by your partner, you will want to treat your partner in the same manner. Partners often have conflict when they play mind games with the other through control, manipulation, threats or hurtful teasing. If your partner does not like your behavior or feels uncomfortable because of what you do, stop the behavior. Talk about what has happened and what can be done to make the situation better.

Take Time to be Together

Probably one of the most important things you can do to improve communication with your partner is to plan to spend more time together. Too often couples lead busy lives that take them in separate directions. Communicating effectively also means enjoying some quiet times together. For instance, you may enjoy walking or reading books together. You likely will find it rewarding when you make a sincere effort to improve communication and connectedness with your partner.

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