

OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

(Adapted from Weeks & Treat's *Couples in Treatment*; Young & Long's *Counseling and Therapy for Couples*)

Listed below are twelve of the most common communication patterns/styles that can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. At the end of the list, there is a form that both you and your partner can complete, so that you can identify and reflect on your own and your partner's ways of expressing yourselves. Please keep in mind that if discussion about your feedback leads to arguments, it could be very beneficial to bring in a neutral third party, like a psychotherapist, to help facilitate your process safely and successfully.

Mind reading:

Refers to the idea that you really know what your partner is thinking, feeling, etc, without checking out those assumptions. This often occurs as a reaction to a message or nonverbal cue, such as an uplifted eyebrow.

Example: "I didn't even tell you about the free tickets to the concert because I knew you wouldn't want to go."
"I could tell by the look on your face that you didn't want to eat at that restaurant."

You may want to ask yourself what signals, both internal and external, tell you that you are mind reading.

Personalization:

This refers to attacking the person as well as the problem. The problem should be defined in terms of what a person does, not who s/he is. It is counterproductive to criticize the other person's character or blame the other. The two most common types of personalization are *labeling/name-calling* ("You're hopeless") and *generalizing* ("you never listen to me.")

When discussing a problem in the relationship, the couple should stay focused on the behavior and not attack each other personally.

Distracting/Kitchen sinking:

There are two ways of distracting. One involves leaving the theme of the discussion by bringing up other unresolved past and present problems, as well as predicted future problems. A related distraction involves one person bringing up an issue and the other person bringing up another issue, and so on ("attack and counterattack").

It is essential to adopt the rule of staying on one topic at a time.

Polarizing language:

Certain concepts in our language only serve to distance couples from each other. These include right versus wrong, always and never, truth versus lie. Black and white language should be eliminated during discussions. It is natural for some people to think in these terms, but it is important to avoid expressing them. These concepts can be viewed as judgemental, which can be inflammatory.

The panel discussion (continued on the next page):

This refers to the tendency for partners to be excessively rational in their discussions so that the underlying feelings are not expressed. People who communicate in this way are often in dual-career partnerships, are highly educated, or merely place a great deal of value on being civil and avoiding conflict.

Example:

Partner A: "The thing that is the most troublesome is that you never call me and tell me when you are going to be late. I don't know how to plan the evening." (*Intent: I am annoyed and lonely*)

Partner B: "I suggest from this point on that that you assume that if I am not home by 7:00, you can make plans that don't include me." (*Impact: I feel angry and pressured.*)

Reflecting on and expressing one's feelings can help to move the discussion along and assist in resolving conflicts.

Being right:

The more unhappy and disconnected that a couple feels, the more both partners may believe that they are "right" and therefore justified in their viewpoint. Inflexibility can be seen in one or both partners. When each person remains rigid and is not open to the other's viewpoint, the situation is at a standstill.

Summarizing self syndrome/cocktail listening:

Some partners rehearse what they want to say and simply wait until the other person stops talking, instead of listening to what is being said. This "summarizing self" continues to reiterate the same complaint without reacting to the partner's statement. The result is that the conversation goes nowhere.

Example: Partner A: "I said ABC."
Partner B: "I said XYZ."
Partner A: "But I said ABC."
Partner B: "But I said XYZ."

Cross-complaining:

This occurs when you answer your partner's complaint with one of your own.

Example: Partner A: "I wish you would not spend so much money on video poker."
Partner B: "Well, I wish you wouldn't invite all of your friends over every weekend."

Although a cross-complaint can sound like a response to the other person's complaint, it is actually a defensive reaction rather than an attempt to solve the original issue being presented.

Incongruent messages:

These communications contain positive and negative aspects or verbal and nonverbal messages that do not carry the same meaning.

Example: one member of a couple verbally encourages the person to talk while continuing to stare intently at the television.

The "stinger" pattern:

This is an incongruent message containing a positive statement with a criticism at the end.

Example: "Sure, you want to spend a lot of time with me now, but why couldn't we have done this five years ago?"

Nonsupportive statements:

Picking apart someone's character and questioning his/her motives and abilities disrupts communication and decreases trust. Often individuals are unaware that this has been the norm in their family. People who grew up in such environments end up bringing this kind of communication pattern to their other relationships and must become aware of the damaging nature of such insults.

Not hearing the positives:

A common cycle in many distressed couples occurs when compliments, praise, and recognition are not heard. Instead, one or both members of the couple hear only the negative aspects of the communication.

Using the following scale, go through each of the obstacles and rate how often you believe you and your partner engage in each of these modes of communication or perception:

Always, Sometimes, or Never ("A", "S", or "N").

Write down any comments you may have about these obstacles, including typical topics these communications center around and/or any specific instances you may recall.

OBSTACLE	SELF	PARTNER	COMMENTS
Mind reading			
Personalization			
Distracting/ Kitchen sinking			
Polarizing language			
The panel discussion			
Being right			
Summarizing self syndrome/ cocktail listening			
Cross-complaining			
Incongruent messages			
The "stinger" pattern			
Nonsupportive statements			
Not hearing the positives			

You may want to sit down with your partner and compare ratings. How accurate do you feel your partner's ratings are, both about him/herself and about you?

What did you discover about your and your partner's mode(s) of communication?

This exercise can be an effective way to promote discussion. It is a powerful first step in working toward improving your and your partner's communication.

Using the following scale, go through each of the obstacles and rate how often you believe you and your partner engage in each of these modes of communication or perception:

Always, Sometimes, or Never ("A", "S", or "N").

Write down any comments you may have about these obstacles, including typical topics these communications center around and/or any specific instances you may recall.

OBSTACLE	SELF	PARTNER	COMMENTS
Mind reading			
Personalization			
Distracting/ Kitchen sinking			
Polarizing language			
The panel discussion			
Being right			
Summarizing self syndrome/ cocktail listening			
Cross-complaining			
Incongruent messages			
The "stinger" pattern			
Nonsupportive statements			
Not hearing the positives			

You may want to sit down with your partner and compare ratings. How accurate do you feel your partner's ratings are, both about him/herself and about you?

What did you discover about your and your partner's mode(s) of communication?

This exercise can be an effective way to promote discussion. It is a powerful first step in working toward improving your and your partner's communication.