

Defining and Changing Destructive Communication Habits

It's not *what*, but *how*. How people disagree or argue has immense influences on the overall quality of the relationship, and is a strong predictor of relationship success or failure. This document contains information and exercises designed to provide insight into communication patterns that may be interrupting your relationships. You are encouraged to complete the exercises independently and then review the content with your counselor. This self-reflective exercise may be shared with a loved one only to inform them of your self-work, and not to analyze their destructive communication habits.



Take a few moments to look at the list below and think of examples of what each of these behaviors look like or sound like when they occur. Use the information on the following pages for examples if you get stumped! Check each box that applies to YOUR behavior in the past

Which of These Communication Habits Are YOU Guilty Of?

- Bringing up several issues at a time
- Switching a subject with a counter accusation
- Making excuses (e.g., "I did _____ because you...")
- Mind reading / analyzing the other person
- Expecting the other person to know what you are thinking
- Suggesting that others are being unreasonable
- Dismissing the feelings, actions, or statements of others
- Exaggeration or hyperbole
- Emphasizing semantics
- Using sarcasm
- Calling witnesses
- Acting like a victim or martyr
- Speaking or acting with contempt
- Tracking
- Being too vague
- The Nuclear Option / Mutual Destruction
- Stonewalling / leaving / pouting

Supported by Science

Several of these defensive behaviors are considered especially toxic. So much so that relationship scientist Dr. John Gottman has included them in his *Four Horsemen of Relationship Apocalypse*:

- ❖ Criticism
- ❖ Contempt
- ❖ Defensiveness
- ❖ Stonewalling is most destructive because it prevents any conversation about a relationship; good or bad.

Destructive Communication Habits Examples

1. Bringing Up Several Issues at a Time (instead of just one thing):

Example: "You never get excited when I do something nice (issue #1), AND you don't take the time to do little things for me (issue #2), AND you prefer spending time with your friends than with me (issue #3)."

A very important rule of problem solving is to address only one issue at a time. Even if multiple issues are related, address one issue at a time to keep everyone involved from getting overwhelmed and frustrated. The goal should be to reach a solution, not to make the other person feel bad.

2. Switching the Subject with Counter Accusations:

Example: "I can't believe you are talking to me about how I should behave. Let's talk about what is wrong with you! You don't even know how to budget."

Related to #1, keep the conversation on one subject at a time. Each person's grievances can be successfully addressed if the conversation stays civil.

3. Making Excuses:

Example: "I spent this money on my hobby just like you spent that money to go on a fishing trip."

Be accountable for your actions. Don't blame others for your choices. An essential aspect of reflective listening is to acknowledge what the other person said before countering.

4. Mind Reading / Analyzing the Other Person:

Example: "Just because I ask you to talk with me about finances, you think I am trying to control you, just like your dad controlled your mom."

What is the old saying about making assumptions? Not only is it offensive to assume that you know what another person is thinking, no one likes to be told what is in his or her head. You may have a suspicion about an underlying issue, but you should bring it up after acknowledging the other person's thoughts, such as in a non-confrontational question like, "Do you think this issue is connected to the fight we had last month?"

5. Expecting the Other Person to Know What You are Thinking

Example: "They should know by now what to do."

Just as dangerous as #4, expecting others to mind read is unfair. Though it is easy to expect others to be more intuitive, it is unfair to be upset about not getting something that you did not ask for.

6. Suggesting that Others Are Being Unreasonable:

Example: "I can't believe you want to spend money on that! No one I know would do that!"

Don't assume you are an authority on what makes sense. Many confusing actions of others are based in their values and life experiences, which differ from yours. If you differ on an important issue, first listen closely to their thoughts. Maintain eye contact. When they are completely finished, simply ask if they are now willing to hear your perspective. Perhaps they will show you the same respect.



7. Dismissing the Feelings, Actions, or Statements of Others

Example: "You finished those house chores because you like a clean house, not as a nice gesture for me."

Even if someone cannot explain to others why they did something or feel a certain way, only they know exactly what is happening inside their mind. Work together to develop a shared meaning.

8. Exaggerating or Hyperbole

Example: "You always get what you want, and I have to starve for things!"

If someone uses words like "always," "never," and other exaggerated speech, the easy response is to highlight exceptions to the statement rather than addressing the actual problem. The discussion will go round and round. Instead, focus on a specific situation and try to not use words like "always," "never," and "forever."

9. Emphasizing Semantics

Example: "She says she was 'irritated'. The truth is that she was out-of-control, raging angry!"

Many arguments get bogged down in differing meanings of words, not in the substantive material. If you think your definition of a particular word differs from another person's definition, simply ask for clarity.

10. Using Sarcasm

Example: "I guess you think you are the financial wizard?"

Sarcasm is common attempt at humor, but it often leads to hurt feelings, however, and erodes a sense of safety in confiding information. Save the sarcasm for the comedy club.



11. Calling Witnesses

Example: "You don't think so!?!? Let's call some people who tell you just how wrong you are!"

It makes sense to invite people whose opinions could be insightful, trustworthy, and/or reliable. However, triangulating others into your argument tends to result in discomfort / awkwardness for the witness(es) once the argument is over.

12. Acting like a Victim or Acting like a Martyr

Examples: "It is always me that has to do without," or "I only allow myself to shop at the cheapest stores, even though all my friends get to have more."

Similar to #5, ask for what you need in a direct and respectful way. Do not "beat around the bush" and expect to be understood. Tell people what you like, need, and want. It is their choice to respond or not. If they do, it is because they care to make you happy, not because you manipulated them

13. Speaking or Acting with Contempt

Example: "You're such a b*tch. I can't listen to you."

Name-calling, ignoring someone's ideas or suggestions, using offensive language, deliberately spending money or withholding funds to get back at someone, rolling your eyes, sighing loudly, standoffishly crossing your arms, turning your back on someone, sadistically smiling... There are too many ways to count!

14. Tracking

Example: "This is the fifth time this year that you have ruined our date night!"

Some people keep a mental bank account in their heads; always keeping track of who has done what to whom. This is a natural tendency that can appear really obnoxious to others. Instead, speak to specific issues, specific feelings, and specific occurrences as a way to express what you want.

15. Being Too Vague

Example: "I need some more respect."

Whether in statements of complaint or appreciation, solution ideas, or goals, specificity helps others know exactly what we expect of them and of ourselves. Vague statements need to be operationalized in terms of specific behaviors in order for others to truly understand what we mean.

16. The Nuclear Option – Mutual Destruction

Examples: "I guess we should just breakup," or "You should find someone else," or "Maybe we shouldn't be together."

There is a saying that you should never pull out a gun until you are ready to pull the trigger. Though it is important for partners to evaluate their relationship, threatening dissolution is never a healthy strategy in an argument. If you are seriously contemplating the end of the relationship, speak with your counselor and/or a trusted advisor before bringing it up to your partner.

17. Stonewalling, Leaving the Room, Pouting

Example: "I don't have to talk to *you* about *my* money!"

Other examples of stonewalling include when a person walks out of the room while the other person is still talking, leaves the building or hangs up the phone during a conversation.

Often, stonewalling is someone's attempt to escape a rough situation or to end a fight before it gets worse. However, what it looks like to the other person is that they are being dismissed, rejected, ignored, and otherwise disrespected.



Studies have shown this behavior to be very, very common in failed romantic relationships. Why? If you can't talk about issues, they do not get resolved, and more problems pile on the mountain of bad feelings and mistrust. Stonewalling solves nothing and makes the situation worse. By following the other guidelines discussed in this packet, you should be able to prevent a situation where stonewalling is likely to occur.

