Effective Communication Guidelines

For couples, families and anyone learning to stay close through hard conversations

Hard conversations ask a lot of us. Our hearts are on the line, old hurts wake up, and for a moment the people we love most can feel like strangers. If you've ever walked away from a conversation wishing you'd said it differently, you are in good company. I have too.

Think of these guidelines as a lantern for those moments. Nobody follows them perfectly. They are a practice to come back to again and again, and they work best when you hold them gently, starting with yourself.

1. Ask First

Before you bring up something tender, check whether the other person has room for it. You may be upset or need to process something, while they may be tired, stretched thin or simply not at their best. Starting with consent gives the conversation its best chance.

> *"Hey, something is moving in me and I'd like to talk it through with you. Are you in a space for that right now?"*

If they aren't, that's okay. Ask them to let you know when they are, or set a time together, and then both of you honor it. A conversation that waits an hour for willing ears usually goes further than one pressed on someone with nothing left to give.

2. Lead with Connection

Before you dive into the problem, remind each other why you're here. Open with something you appreciate, or simply say, "This matters to me because you matter to me." If you didn't care, you wouldn't be in this relationship. Let the other person hear it.

Honesty takes courage, and so does staying open while someone is honest with you. Both are acts of love. When connection comes first, even hard words have somewhere soft to land.

3. Own Your Experience

Your feelings are yours, and they deserve to be honored. Someone's words or actions may set something off in you, and many people might feel angry in the same situation, yet the anger rising in you belongs to you. Claiming it keeps your power where it belongs, with you. "You made me so angry" hands that power to someone else.

Watch for "I feel that..." and "I feel like..." Neither one is a feeling. Both are judgments or thoughts borrowing feeling words. "I feel that you don't care" is a story about the other person, with no feeling in it at all. A feeling is usually a single word: sad, scared, hurt, lonely, relieved, tender, glad.

Most of us carry more than one feeling at a time. You can speak for the part of you that is upset: "A part of me is furious right now, and another part of me wants us to find our way back to each other." There is room in you for all of it, and saying so leaves room for the other person too.

4. Reveal What Is Happening Inside You

Underneath every reaction there are layers: the sensations in your body, the emotions they carry, the thoughts that rush in, and the meaning you weave out of all of it. Sharing those layers one at a time lets the other person meet you instead of defending against you.

> *"My chest is tight. I'm scared. The story I'm telling myself is that you're pulling away from me. Can I check that out with you?"*

Your story may turn out to be accurate or way off. Offered as a story, it opens a conversation; offered as fact, it delivers a verdict. This kind of sharing is vulnerable, and it is also where intimacy lives. If finding words for body sensations is hard for you, the Sensation Vocabulary handout can help.

5. Building an I-Statement

An I-Statement says what happened, how it landed in you, and what you would like, without blame. Here is a simple frame to begin with:

> *When [what happened, described so you could both agree on it], I feel [a feeling], because [what it touches or what matters to you]. Would you be willing to [a clear, doable request]?*

Example: "When you came home two hours later than you said and I hadn't heard from you, I felt scared, because I love you and my mind went to the worst. Would you be willing to text me when your plans change?"

If the frame feels clunky at first, that's normal. Any new language feels awkward before it feels like home, and with practice you'll find your own words.

Common Stumbles

- **Hidden you-statements.** "I feel like you never listen" is an accusation with an "I" in front of it.
- **Sharing only the hard feelings.** Let people know when they delight you, relieve you or move you. Appreciation is communication too, and it fills the well you'll draw from on harder days.
- **Shrinking your feelings.** If you are devastated and say you're "a little bummed," the other person can't meet you where you are. Let your words match the size of what you feel.
- **Leading with anger.** Anger often stands guard over something more tender, like hurt, fear or disappointment, and those softer feelings are much easier to hear. "I'm so angry you didn't call" tends to start a fight. "I was scared when I didn't hear

from you" tends to draw the other person closer. If reactivity runs high and you are new to this practice, try naming the tender feeling first.

6. Listen the Way You Want to Be Heard

Being deeply listened to is one of the most healing experiences a person can have. You can offer that gift.

- **Set your rebuttal aside.** While the other person is talking, resist building your next argument. If you can't listen to them, they are unlikely to listen to you.
- **Reflect back.** "What I heard you say is... Did I get that right? Did I miss anything?" Reflecting catches misunderstandings before they grow, and it keeps you from laying your own meaning over their words.
- **Assume nothing.** When you feel certain you know what they meant, get curious and ask.
- **Step into their shoes.** If you want to be understood, offer the same willingness to understand. Relationship is a two-way street.
- **Mind your body.** Rolled eyes, crossed arms and pursed lips speak loudly. Let your body be open and relaxed so the other person feels safe enough to be honest.
- **Let them finish.** The one exception is when someone is name-calling or yelling. Then you can calmly ask them to stop and invite them to say it again in a way you can take in.

7. What Gets in the Way

We all reach for these when we're hurting. They are protective habits, usually learned long ago, and they cost us the very closeness we long for. Be kind with yourself when you catch one.

- **Name-calling** wounds the other person and dishonors the relationship.
- **Criticism and finger-pointing** put people on the defensive, and then they can't hear what you most need them to hear. They often respond in ways that get you the opposite of what you want.
- **"Always" and "never"** are rarely accurate, and they leave the other person no room to move.
- **Yelling** does not help. This is especially true for parents, or anyone larger than the person they are in conflict with. Because of the difference in size and power, yelling can terrify a child even when they hide it. A child who looks tough after being yelled at is often a scared child protecting themself. If you feel the urge to yell, take it as your signal to step away (see When You're Flooded).
- **Using these guidelines as a weapon.** Pointing out someone else's slip is just another way to criticize. Keep this sheet for your own growth.

For more on everyday habits that shut conversations down, see the handout on Thomas Gordon's 12 Roadblocks to Listening.

8. When You're Flooded: Learning to Step Away

When your heart is racing and your words are getting sharp, the conversation can't go anywhere good. Pause and breathe. If one breath isn't enough, step away, and tell the other person when you'll come back. Learning to step away is a skill, and like any skill it gets easier with practice. You might say:

> *"I have a part that's taking over right now, and I don't want it doing the talking. Can we take a break?"*
>
> *"I'm pretty activated right now. I'd like to come back to this when I can engage from a less triggered state."*

A clear return time eases the other person's fear of being abandoned or brushed off. Spend the break calming your body rather than rehearsing your case. If you can, step outside, where there is more room to breathe. Feel the wind on your face or the sun across your shoulders. Press your bare feet into grass or soil, or watch a hawk turn slow circles until your breath slows with it. A break taken this way is an act of care for the relationship, as long as you come back. Slowing down is what lets you respond instead of react.

9. Look at Your Side First

Before naming what the other person did, look for your own contribution. This doesn't excuse their behavior. It means taking responsibility for your share of the dance between you. That takes humility, and humility is a strength.

And when you can, give up being right. Put your energy into righting the relationship.

10. Welcome Everything

Every feeling and experience is welcome here. Tears, anger, confusion and long pauses all belong. Welcoming something is different from agreeing with it. You can honor yourself and the other person at the same time: stand up for yourself without putting them down, and hear them out without abandoning yourself.

11. Calling on Support

Hard conversations ask a great deal of us, and you don’t have to bring all of it from your own reserves. Something opens when we step out from under a roof. The sky gives a tight conversation more room, and the living world has been mending relationships far longer than we have. You might walk side by side instead of sitting face to face; hard things are often easier to say while moving along a trail or a shoreline. You might set a stone, a feather or a flower between you as a reminder that something larger holds you both. Some couples pray together. Some call on an animal spirit guide, the old oak down the street, a saint from their tradition, or simply on Love itself. Ask in whatever way is true for you, and let yourselves be held.

12. When We Work Together: Relationship Coaching

- I'll be in your corner as your coach. I will interrupt when the guidelines slip so you can practice a new way of relating right in the moment.
- I'll ask you to speak directly to each other, rather than talking about each other to me. My hope is that you'll leave able to do this on your own, at your kitchen table, without me.
- If one of you becomes very activated, I may meet with each of you separately for a few minutes.
- We'll work on one topic at a time. If we get through it and have time left, we may take up a second.
- Complaining about the other person won't move things forward. If I also see you individually, there is space there for your frustrations, and the focus stays on you. We have no power to change another person; we do have power to change ourselves. When everyone tends their own part, the whole family heals more readily.

A Final Word

You won't get this right every time. Neither will the people you love. What matters most is the willingness to come back to each other and repair. Every time you do, you weave something stronger between you.

Influences and Credits

These guidelines grew out of many years of practice and the teachers whose work shaped it.

- The I-message was introduced by Dr. Thomas Gordon in Parent Effectiveness Training.
- The difference between feelings and thoughts, and pairing a feeling with a clear request, draw on Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication.
- Leading with connection, flooding, calming breaks and repair draw on the research of Drs. John and Julie Gottman.
- Anger as a guard for more tender feelings draws on Emotionally Focused Therapy, developed by Drs. Leslie Greenberg and Sue Johnson.
- "The story I'm telling myself" is a phrase popularized by Dr. Brené Brown.
- Speaking for a part comes from Internal Family Systems, developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz.
- Calling on the support of the living world and the unseen comes from Neoshamanic IFS (NIFS), the approach I practice and teach.
- Connection before content, revealing your inner experience, owning your experience, assuming nothing, welcoming everything, and honoring self and other draw on the principles and practices of Authentic Relating Training International (ART International).