Unpartnering Communication Guidelines

For partners who are ending a relationship and want to do it with care

Ending a relationship is one of the hardest passages a person can walk through. Even when the decision is clear, and even when it is mutual, grief, relief and fear can all show up in the same afternoon. The person who once knew you best may now feel like the one you have to brace against.

Over the years you wove a life together: a home, routines, friendships, maybe children. Separating means loosening that weave thread by thread. Some threads come free easily. Others are knotted tight, and pulling on them hurts. These guidelines can help you loosen the weave with care, so that each of you walks away with your own threads intact, and any children you share keep a whole cloth to wrap themselves in.

They build on the Effective Communication Guidelines handout. Those practices hold here too, with a few changes for a relationship that is changing shape. Every couple is different, and every story has its own shape. Take these as tips rather than hard rules: practices that make clear, kind communication more likely. Adapt them to fit your family, and hold them gently, starting with yourself.

1. Set a Shared Intention

Before you negotiate a single detail, talk about how you want this ending to go. Most couples, even angry ones, want some of the same things underneath: to be treated with respect and to protect the children. Many also hope to look back on this time someday without shame. Try writing one or two sentences together and keeping them where you can both see them:

> *“We are ending our marriage with as much respect as we can find. Our children will never have to choose between us.”*

When a conversation starts to slide, either of you can come back to it: “Is this getting us where we said we wanted to go?” If you can’t agree on a shared intention, set your own. You are only ever responsible for your half of the conversation.

2. Let the Relationship Change Shape

The way you talked as partners belongs to the relationship that is ending. Pet names, long late-night processing, leaning on each other for comfort, the same old fight on its hundredth round: these habits can keep you tangled in what you are trying to release.

Many people find it helps to think of the new relationship as a respectful working partnership, closer to colleagues on a shared project than to intimates. Be courteous and keep to the task in front of you. If you share children, the project is raising them well. If you don’t, the project is finishing the separation with both of you whole. This can feel cold at first. Over time, many people discover that clear edges are what make kindness possible again.

When One of You Stays in the Home You Shared

Once one of you moves out, the home becomes the other person's space, even if it is partly yours financially. The money question belongs in your agreements. The everyday question is one of respect. Walking in unannounced is invasive, and it can reopen wounds for both of you. Each of you needs time and space of your own to grieve and begin again.

- Knock or ring the bell. Don't let yourself in, even if you have a key.
- Arrange visits ahead of time, including trips to pick up belongings, with a day and time you both agree on.
- Keep to the rooms you need for what you came to do. Bedrooms, drawers and mail belong to the person who lives there now.
- If you share children, handoffs happen at the door unless you are both comfortable with something else.
- If you are the one who stays, say clearly what you need, give reasonable access to the other person's things, and agree on a date for collecting what's left.

3. Agree on How and When You'll Talk

Uncertainty breeds anxiety. Agreeing on the basics takes a lot of heat out of the day-to-day.

- **Choose your channels.** Many separating couples use email for planning and money, text only for time-sensitive logistics ("Running ten minutes late"), and a scheduled call or meeting for bigger decisions and anything tender. Grievances never go by text. Co-parents often keep a shared calendar so the schedule lives in one place.
- **Limit how often you're in touch.** Agree on how many times a day you'll be in contact, if at all. Many couples settle on one check-in a day for logistics, or a set time each week for planning. Constant contact keeps both of you on high alert and leaves no room to heal.
- **Set boundaries around conversations.** Agree on which topics wait for a scheduled conversation, which are off the table for now, and that either of you can end a conversation that is going badly and pick it up another time.
- **Set response times.** Agree on how quickly non-urgent messages get answered, perhaps within a day, and what counts as a true emergency.
- **Protect your off-hours.** Decide whether late-night messages are off-limits. Nothing about a separation is improved by a text at 11 pm.
- **One topic at a time.** Bundling the summer schedule, the car payment and an old grievance into one message is a recipe for a fight. Take them one by one.

4. Give Your Grief Its Own Home

Ending a relationship is a loss, and loss needs tending. Grief, anger, guilt, longing and relief may come in waves, sometimes within a single hour. All of it belongs. What helps

is giving those feelings a home outside the logistics: a trusted friend, a support group, a journal, time under open sky, your coach, your own inner work.

Your former partner is usually no longer the right person to hold your grief about them. Asking them to carry it tends to reopen the wound for you both.

You may have a part that wants them to finally understand, to apologize, to see what they did. That part makes sense. Welcome it, listen to it and give it care. Just don't send it to negotiate the furniture.

When Something Needs to Be Talked Through

Sometimes a grievance between you does need to be said and heard. Never process it by text or email, and this matters most in a high-conflict split. Writing strips out tone and invites a long, spiraling exchange that leaves both of you raw.

Set up a time instead. First check in with yourself: are you resourced enough to stay grounded, and do you know what you hope will come of it? Then ask your soon-to-be ex whether they have room for it, the same way the Effective Communication Guidelines suggest asking first.

> *"There's something about last week I'd like to talk through with you. Would you be open to a call this weekend, when we both have the space for it?"*

If they say no, or not yet, honor it. If these conversations keep going badly, bring them to a coach or mediator rather than having them alone.

5. Write Messages That Lower the Temperature

So much of a separation happens in writing, and writing has no tone of voice. A message you meant as neutral can land as an attack. Bill Eddy of the High Conflict Institute offers a simple frame he calls a BIFF® Response:

- **Brief.** A few sentences. A long message gives the other person more to react to.
- **Informative.** Stick to the facts and the information that is needed. Leave out opinions, self-defense and history.
- **Friendly.** A warm greeting or a simple thank-you lowers the temperature.
- **Firm.** Close the loop clearly so the conversation doesn't keep spinning. Kind and clear can live in the same sentence.

Example: "Hi Sam, thanks for letting me know. I can take the kids Saturday from 10 to 4 and will have them back for dinner. Have a good week."

Before You Hit Send

- Read it as if you were the one receiving it on your worst day.
- If you're upset, wait. Unless something is urgent, a message can almost always sit for a few hours, or until morning.
- Ask whether this message moves you toward your shared intention.
- Cut every sentence that defends your character, explains the past or scores a point.

When You Receive a Hard Message

You don't have to answer every accusation or correct every story. Respond to the information that needs a response and let the rest go by. Answering the bait only feeds it. If a message stirs you up, take a breath, step away and come back to it later.

6. Speak from Your Own Side

The I-Statement from the Effective Communication Guidelines works here too, in a lighter form. In a separation you may choose to share less of your inner world than you once did, and that's appropriate. What matters is speaking from your own experience and making requests that are clear and doable.

> *"When the schedule changes the morning of, I end up scrambling and the kids get anxious. Would you be willing to let me know by Thursday if the weekend plan needs to shift?"*

Keep your requests about the future. Rehearsing the past rarely changes it.

7. When Children Are Part of Your Story

Children can thrive after their parents separate. Decades of research point the same way: the conflict children get caught in does far more harm than the separation itself. Your children are made of both of you. When they hear one parent run down the other, some part of them hears it about themselves.

Telling Your Children

- Tell them together if you can, with a simple story you've agreed on ahead of time.
- Keep it honest and age-appropriate. Children don't need the adult reasons. They need to know what will change, what will stay the same, and who will take care of them.
- Tell them clearly that it isn't their fault. Nothing they did caused it, and nothing they do can fix it.
- Let them know you will both keep loving them, and that they are free to love you both.
- Leave room for their feelings, including anger at you, and for questions that surface weeks or months later.

Keeping Them Out of the Middle

- Don't ask children to carry messages, money or news between homes. Talk to each other directly.
- Don't speak against the other parent where children can hear. That includes phone calls in the next room and the faces you make.
- Don't ask children to report on the other home or to keep secrets from the other parent.
- Keep handoffs warm and short. Save logistics for a separate time, away from the children.

- Let children carry what they love back and forth: a favorite toy, photos, stories about their time with the other parent.
- Welcome their love for the other parent. “You must miss your dad. Want to call him before bed?” is a gift.
- Be careful about leaning on an older child as your confidant. Even a mature child is a child, and a parent’s grief is too heavy for them to carry.

When Cooperation Is Hard

If every conversation turns into a fight, some families do better with parallel parenting for a season: less direct contact, clear written agreements, communication in writing only, and each home running its own way during its own time. Less contact can mean less conflict reaching the children. Often, as feelings settle, parents find their way back to more cooperation.

8. What Gets in the Way

These moves are understandable. Most of them come from parts of us that are hurting and trying to protect us. They also tend to keep the ending going long after it needs to. Be kind with yourself when you catch one.

- **Relitigating the relationship.** Who was right about the marriage is a question that rarely gets settled and always costs you.
- **Keeping score.** Tracking every late pickup and broken promise turns a partnership into a courtroom.
- **Using leverage.** Money, the house, the children’s time and shared friendships should never become bargaining chips.
- **Mixed signals.** Late-night calls, sleeping together or “maybe someday” talk can stir hope in one person and confusion in both. If you are truly unsure whether to separate, say so honestly, and get support with that decision before you go further.
- **Venting in public.** Social media posts about your former partner outlive your anger, and your children and future partners may read them someday.
- **Watching their new life.** Checking their accounts or asking mutual friends for updates keeps the wound open. Turn toward building your own.

9. When You’re Flooded

Separations stir up big feelings, and a racing heart makes for sharp words. When you feel yourself flooding, pause and breathe. If one breath isn’t enough, step away, and tell the other person when you’ll come back so the break doesn’t feel like a door slamming.

> *“I’m getting too worked up to be fair right now. Can we pick this up tomorrow at noon?”*

In writing, flooding often shows up as the urge to reply right now. Let that urge be your signal to wait.

10. Repair Matters, Even Now

You will slip. So will they. A short, sincere repair keeps one rough moment from hardening into a pattern, and it builds the trust you'll need for years if you share children.

> *"I was sharp with you yesterday, and I'm sorry. Here's the information you asked for."*

A repair doesn't require an apology in return. It is for your own integrity as much as for the relationship.

11. Honor What Was

When the dust begins to settle, some couples find it healing to acknowledge what the relationship gave them: the good years, the children, the ways each of them grew. This might be a conversation, a letter you may or may not send, or a simple ritual of release, such as sitting beside moving water and letting go of what you're ready to set down.

This is an invitation, never a requirement. It works only when both people are ready, and it may come months or years later. Even on your own, you can gather up what the relationship taught you and carry it forward. Katherine Woodward Thomas's Conscious Uncoupling offers a lovely framework for this kind of ending.

12. Calling on Support

You don't have to carry this ending alone. Grief needs room, and walls can make it feel bigger than it is. When you can, take it outside. Sit with your back against a tree and let it take some of your weight. Let the wind move through your hair, or turn your face to the sun until something in your chest unclenches. Lie on your back and watch the clouds change shape; nothing in the sky holds on for long. Before a hard conversation, you might call on your future self, the one who has already walked through this ending and come out whole, and ask what they would tell you now. Carry a shell or a feather from a place you love in your pocket. Ask an animal spirit guide, a grandmother who survived her own heartbreak, or whatever you call the Great Mystery to stand beside you as you speak.

13. When Safety Comes First

These guidelines assume you both feel safe. If there has been violence, threats, stalking or a pattern of control, or if you are afraid of your partner, your safety comes first. You don't owe anyone a face-to-face conversation. Communicate in writing or through a third party, such as an attorney, and reach out for support. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is free, confidential and available around the clock:

> *Call 800-799-7233, text START to 88788, or chat online at thehotline.org*

14. When We Work Together: Coaching Through a Separation

- I'll be in your corner as you move through this. I can help you plan a hard conversation, find words for a difficult message, or tend the parts of you that are grieving.
- If I work with both of you, I'll hold space for each of you, and I may meet with you separately.
- I won't decide who is right. Our work is about how each of you moves forward.
- As a spiritual doula, I can also help you create a ritual to mark this ending, on your own or together.
- I don't give legal or financial advice. For agreements about property, money or parenting time, a mediator or attorney is the right guide. Many couples find mediation or a collaborative process gentler than going to court.

A Final Word

Endings are part of every life. Done with care, an ending can be one of the most loving things two people ever do for each other. The threads you wove together will always be part of who you are. As you loosen them, may each of you gather your own and carry them into a life that fits you, and may any children you share feel the love of both of you, in both of their homes.

Free Resources

- **How to Write a BIFF Response®,** a free article from the High Conflict Institute: highconflictinstitute.com/biff-method
- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline:** thehotline.org or 800-799-7233
- **Co-parenting classes.** Many county courts offer free or low-cost classes for separating parents. Search your county name plus "parenting after separation class."
- **Related handouts:** Effective Communication Guidelines and Thomas Gordon's 12 Roadblocks to Listening.

Further Reading

- Conscious Uncoupling: 5 Steps to Living Happily Even After, by Katherine Woodward Thomas
- Mom's House, Dad's House, by Isolina Ricci
- Two Homes, One Childhood: A Parenting Plan to Last a Lifetime, by Robert E. Emery
- The Good Divorce, by Constance Ahrons
- BIFF for CoParent Communication, by Bill Eddy, Annette T. Burns and Kevin Chafin

Influences and Credits

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

- The BIFF® Response was developed by Bill Eddy and is a registered trademark of the High Conflict Institute.
- Treating the new relationship as a respectful working partnership draws on Isolina Ricci's Mom's House, Dad's House.
- Protecting children from conflict, and the grief that comes with divorce, draw on the research of Dr. Robert Emery.
- A family continuing across two homes draws on Dr. Constance Ahrons's The Good Divorce.
- Honoring what was draws on Katherine Woodward Thomas's Conscious Uncoupling.
- Flooding, calming breaks and repair draw on the research of Drs. John and Julie Gottman.
- The I-message was introduced by Dr. Thomas Gordon, and pairing a feeling with a clear request draws on Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication.
- 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.