

Strengthening Your Relationship

During the past 20 years, our team of relationship coaches and counselors have consistently tracked the increase in marital and relationship problems among the many people who use our confidential service. It is common knowledge that an exceedingly high percentage of marriages either end in divorce or seem to lock couples in relationships of "quiet desperation". The same is often true for relationships: they often end because of conflict.

Developing and maintaining a loving, empathic, and supportive relationship with your significant other, spouse, or partner, has never been more difficult than we now see in society at large. **And it can be even harder for people in the National Guard and other branches of the military.** There are indeed many factors that account for this trend. The apparent difficulties that so many Americans have in "growing" a fulfilling and mature relationship has not only led to the high divorce rate, but also has increased child stress levels, depression, sexual frustrations, and an inability to concentrate at work. **Very few individuals can effectively keep the distress of a deteriorating relationship from interfering with responsibilities, creativity, and performance on the job.**

On its own, a better communication strategy will not totally heal a failing or dysfunctional relationship. Certain communicational techniques will, however, reduce the negative emotional intensity that so many couples experience once their relationship begins to derail. We suggest that couples use some of the following strategies as an **initial step** for improving a relationship or marriage:

- ◆ Be very clear on what you feel, what you think, and what you want.
- ◆ Ask your partner what he or she needs, and just listen without responding.
- ◆ Practice immediate time-out when emotions escalate in an aggressive direction.
- ◆ Avoid "unfair fighting tactics" such as blame or character attacks.
- ◆ Be very specific about behavior you do not like and how this behavior has made you feel.
- ◆ Search for win-win solutions vs. setting up a win-lose battle.
- ◆ Avoid phrases such as "You are" or "You should".
- ◆ Set aside time to discuss the relationship when things are going well, as opposed to a discussion in the heat of an argument.
- ◆ Stop keeping score. You're both on the same team. No one has to win!
- ◆ Ask your partner questions, and seek clarification on what you have heard before attacking a point.
- ◆ Write each other brief letters to increase the likelihood you will hear feedback privately and quietly.
- ◆ Make sure to reward or reinforce each other when new and positive behavior is demonstrated.

What most couples share in common are two basic needs: Being loved and Respected. When disagreements do arise, how couples communicate their feelings vary greatly. Men tend to become "flooded" with strong emotions more quickly than women. In response, men may

tend to retreat to a quiet place or their “cave” to sort out thoughts. Women may interpret this as avoidance or “stonewalling”. Women, on the other hand, may want to process feelings more actively with their spouse in hopes of “being heard”.

Here are some **additional tips** that may help strengthen your relationship:

1. Use the “I” form of communication of the “X,Y,Z” formula when a disagreement arises: “When you say X, I feel Y, and I would rather Z occur”.
2. Assess each others’ needs when strong emotions occur. While one may want to vent, the other may need some quiet space to decompress. Both are okay.
3. Try to have empathy with your partner—hear the words behind the hurt and anger.
4. Set aside 30-40 minutes of uninterrupted time with you partner at the end of the day to focus on each other. Discuss three events that occurred during the day and the feelings associated with these events. Let your partner give feedback and then let him/her tell you about the day. **Do not be quick to offer solutions but rather process the feeling associated with the day’s events.**
5. Some helpful books on the subject are:
 - ◆ Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus, by John Gray
 - ◆ Emotional Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman
 - ◆ Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, by John Gottman
 - ◆ Talking from 9-5, by Deborah Tannen

There are many more tactical and strategic steps that couples can take to realign themselves within a relationship. Obviously, results take time and are dependent on each person's willingness to share in the responsibility. **There are no quick fixes, but an initial focus on altering how we communicate can make an important difference.**

For further assistance our staff is available to speak with you privately, confidentially and at no charge as part of the [Guard Your Buddy](#) program. We can be reached 24/7 at 855 HELP GYB (855-435-7492).

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