

6 Rules for Talking and Listening

from Dr Phil

When it comes to relating to each other, *communication* is perhaps the most overused term in our vocabulary. The problem is that most people don't really know what good communication is. But talking and listening are essential tools for learning about your partner's feelings, making your feelings known and solving problems that arise within a relationship. As the saying goes, "It's better to light one candle than curse the darkness," so here's my attempt to shed some light on the subject and help you get better at the art of exchange.

Rule #1: Insist on emotional integrity

Tell it like it is!

You must insist that everything you say, imply, or insinuate is accurate, and if your partner challenges you on those messages, you must step up and own them. Mean what you say and say what you mean.

You don't have to tell people everything you think or feel. But you do have to be accurate when you choose to disclose.

Suppose you're upset.

When your partner senses that and asks, "Is something bothering you?" emotional integrity requires that you won't deny the message you're sending verbally or otherwise by saying, "Nothing is wrong; I'm fine." You may not be ready to discuss it, so the accurate answer might be, "I don't want to tell you right now; I'm just not ready to talk about it."

A lot of couples flagrantly violate this principle. Then they say, "We have trouble communicating." Of course they do—they both lie like dogs!

And while we're on the subject: A material omission—leaving out something of crucial importance—is as much a lie as any actual misstatement.

Rule #2: Be a two-way, not a one-way, communicator

A one-way communicator talks but never listens and pays no attention to whether the listener appears to be "getting it."

For her it's all about the telling, as in, "What I want you to do is go out there, get this work done, give these people this message, put those kids to bed, and come back in here." If that's how you communicate, all you know is what you've said, and you haven't got a clue about what the other person heard.

Result: conflict.

But as soon as a one-way communicator asks for feedback, look what happens:

She: "Here's what I'd like you to do: A, B, C, and D. Does that sound okay to you?"

He: "Well, L, Q, R, and P don't make a whole lot of sense to me."

No wonder they're not getting along—they're not even talking about the same thing!

When she checks to make sure that he has received the message, she uncovers a communication glitch.

By soliciting feedback—by giving as much weight to what is heard as to what is said—you put a spotlight on the issues you, together, need to clarify.

Rule #3: Establish a motive

Whether you're talking or listening, you need to be clear about why something's being said.

Motive and message are important. If you've got a husband who says, "You're like the Spanish Inquisition. You're always asking me these questions and bugging me all the time," you need to look at what's behind those words. Is he trying to make you feel guilty because there's something he doesn't want you to see?

Or are you trying to control too much of his life because you are insecure? In answering those questions, you'll figure out the motive and be able to move on from there.

Rule #4: Check in with each other

You and your partner must agree to test each other's messages and respond honestly.

No more b.s. Ask your partner, "Is what you're saying really the way you feel? Is that true?" Remember that when you ask the question, you have to be ready to hear the true answer. And you've got to be willing to take the same test yourself.

If asked, "So you're really okay?" have the guts to say, "No, I'm not," when you're really not. Ask your partner the questions that will confirm his or her feelings.

Rule #5: Be an active listener

Most people are passive listeners. If you intend to become an active listener, you'll need to master two important tools. A famous psychologist named Carl Rogers called them Reflection of Content and Reflection of Feeling. Rogers hit the nail on the head with this one.

Reflecting a speaker's content means that you listen to the person; then you give him or her feedback that makes it clear you're receiving the factual message—but as you'll see, it isn't all about the facts.

Here's an example of someone's getting the information but missing the message:

A: "Sorry I'm late. As I was leaving the house, my dog ran into the street and was hit by a car." B (reflecting the content): "So your dog got hit by a car?" A: "Right."
B: "Is he dead?" A: "Uh-huh." B: "So what did you do with the dog's body?"

In that example, Person B establishes that Person A has been heard, which addresses a fundamental need for A. But B has clearly missed the point.

To be an active listener in an emotionally relevant situation, B has to do more than

just reflect the factual information that A has conveyed. Reflection of feeling tells your partner not just that he's been heard but that you have "plugged into" his life and experienced it in some way, which is essential to his satisfaction.

Reflection of feeling sounds like this:

A: "Sorry I'm late. As I was leaving the house, my dog ran into the street and got hit by a car." B (reflecting the feeling): "Oh, my gosh—you must feel terrible." A: "Well, I do. We'd had the dog for 12 years, and my kids really loved him."

B: "I'm sure they must be so upset; I'm sorry you're going through this."

Being able to reflect the feeling, not just the content, is essential to the success of your communication.

Rule #6: Evaluate your filters

When you and I engage in conversation, I can't control how well you communicate; I can only control how well I receive what you're telling me. I can go on the alert to things that may distort the messages you're sending me—I call them filters.

To be a good listener, you've got to know what your filters are. Maybe you're coming into a given conversation with an agenda. Maybe you're judging the speaker and don't trust him at all.

Maybe you're angry. Any one of these psychological filters can dramatically distort what you hear.

Filters cause you to decide things ahead of time. You may have prejudged your partner and decided that he's a hound dog, that he doesn't love you anymore.

Result: No matter what he says to you, you're going to distort it to conform to what you're already thinking, feeling, and believing.

Take an inventory of your filters. If you're not aware of them, you can defeat the best communicator in the world because you'll distort the message, regardless of how well it was sent.