

12 Rules for Constructive Communication

Destructive communication erodes self-esteem and harms relationships. Such communication patterns may be destructive, but, sadly, plenty of people fall into the trap of indulging in them. If you and your relationship partners follow these rules and steer clear of the traps of destructive communication, you will almost certainly feel better about each other and your relationship.

1. *Use I-messages instead of You-messages.* You-messages sound blaming and accusing. With an I-message, you can convey the same message without sounding blaming. For example:

You-message: “You left the dishes in the sink again.”

I-message: “When you don’t clean up after yourself, I feel taken advantage of.”

2. *Communicate the entire message.* According to McKay et al. in their excellent book *Couple Skills* (see Suggested Reading), complete messages include four components:

Observations: neutral statements of fact

Thoughts: your own opinions and beliefs

Feelings: descriptions of your emotions

Needs: a statement of what you need or want from the other person

Here is an example of a complete message: “The weekend is coming up. I hope we can go to the movies together. I would like to spend some time with you.”

An incomplete message leaves out one or more of these components. It might sound like this: “I hope we can go to the movies this weekend.” There isn’t really anything wrong with this statement, but the first one is more complete and will more likely result in the speaker getting what he or she wants.

3. *Don’t use your feelings as weapons.* Just describe what you are feeling as objectively as possible, not aggressively. Be as specific as possible and keep your voice under control. For example:

Objective: “I felt really hurt when you said that I probably wouldn’t pass the bar the first time.”

Aggressive: (*yelling*) “You are such an idiot! How dare you insult me like that!”

4. *Use specific language.* When you have a complaint, be specific. For example, “I’m upset that you left the food out on the table” is clearer than saying, “Thanks for the mess you left me.” The first statement is less likely to produce defensiveness and leaves little room for misunderstanding.

5. *Focus on the problem, not the person.* Consider how different these two statements sound:

“You are such a complete slob.”

“I wish you would take your stuff upstairs.”

Attacking someone’s personality or character—rather than a specific behavior—is different from simply expressing a complaint. A complaint focuses on a specific action. Criticism is more blaming and more global. It sounds like this: “You always screw the budget up. Can’t you do anything right?”

Behavior like this is damaging to a relationship because:

- Criticism is *destructive* rather than *constructive*.
- It involves blame.
- Criticisms are global and tend to be generalizations (*you always, you never, etc.*).
- Criticisms attack the other person personally.
- It feels overwhelming to be on the receiving end.

6. *Stop bringing up ancient history.* It’s more constructive to focus on the issue at hand, not bring up past hurts. When you are upset with your partner and add past issues to the discussion, it can only escalate the conflict. It feels unfair and can never be productive. If you still have feelings about past issues, it is important to resolve them and move on, not use them as weapons every time you have a disagreement with your partner.

7. *Watch out for mixed messages.* Keep your statements clean, avoiding the temptation to mix compliments and complaints. For example, let’s say that you meet your friend at a cocktail party. You think she looks nice, but her dress seems a little too provocative.

Straight message: “You look very nice tonight.”

Mixed message: “You look so pretty. I would never have the nerve to wear that.”

8. *Pay attention to your body language.* Your words are only part of the message you communicate. If you say “How nice to see you” while frowning, your message becomes unclear. Think about what message you want to convey and be sure that your body is in harmony with it. Watch out for things like these:

- Rolling your eyes
- Crossing your legs and arms
- Tapping your foot
- Clenching your teeth

9. *Pay attention to your emotions and keep from becoming overwhelmed.* If you are calm, you are less likely to say things you'll later regret, things that could be destructive to your relationship. You will be less likely to become defensive and shut your partner out. Examples of ways to calm yourself and keep from getting carried away with emotion include the following:

- Pay attention to your physical responses. Is your heart racing? Are you breathing faster? If you are, take a time-out.
- Leave the room. Go for a drive. Do something relaxing. Listen to music or do relaxation exercises.
- Make a conscious effort to calm yourself down. Say things to yourself like:

“I’m very upset right now, but it’ll be okay. I still love her.”

“Even though we disagree, we still have a good relationship.”

“We can work this out. We’re partners.”

10. *Resolve negative feelings.* If you have bad feelings about your partner, take steps to resolve them. Don’t let them grow into feelings of contempt. When you engage in behavior (verbal or nonverbal) that conveys a lack of respect, you are placing your relationship in serious danger. This includes obvious abuse, and also insults, making faces, and name-calling. Any relationship that is plagued by abusiveness and negativity will have a very difficult time surviving.

11. *Don’t be defensive.* It is understandable to react defensively when you are in a conflict situation, but it can be dangerous to a relationship. Defensiveness tends to escalate the conflict and does nothing to resolve it. Some examples of defensive behavior include:

- Denying responsibility (*I did not!*)
- Making excuses (*I couldn’t help it; traffic was awful*)
- Ignoring what your partner says and throwing a complaint back (*Yeah, well, what about the mess you left yesterday?*)
- Saying *Yes, but...*
- Whining
- Rolling your eyes or making a face

12. *Don’t shut down.* In *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last* (see Suggested Reading), author John Gottman describes the dangers of shutting out the other person. He calls this behavior *stonewalling* and says that it means refusing to communicate, storming out of the room, or any kind of withdrawing. When a person is stonewalling, communication is impossible because he or she is refusing to participate. When it becomes a regular pattern of communication, stonewalling is very damaging to a relationship.

Suggested Reading

Gottman, John, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York, NY: Fireside Books, 1994.

McKay, Matthew, Fanning, Patrick, and Paleg, Kim, *Couple Skills: Making Your Relationship Work*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1994.