

Improving Your Relationship

From time to time, we all need to work a little harder with our partners at making our relationships the best they can be. This Cheat Sheet covers some of the key issues you'll meet along the way. Keep it handy.

Using Listening Techniques to Improve Your Relationship

Improving communication is a key part of improving your relationship. In fact, it's the single most significant improvement you can make. To be an effective communicator, you have to be a good listener first. Take these key concepts on board:

- **Attending:** This means showing that you're paying attention. You can do that by ensuring that your body language is open and that you're facing your partner, and by giving good eye contact. Also nod your head to show you're listening, and provide minimal verbal cues such as uttering 'uh, um' at key points.
- **Restating:** If your partner has said something particularly important, demonstrate your understanding by repeating it back – 'So you're saying you want me to pick up the kids on the way back from work tomorrow.'
- **Clarifying:** If you're not sure that you've understood something, ask for clarification – 'So are you saying you want me to pick up the kids on the way back from work tomorrow?'
- **Summarising:** When you've shared a lot of information, you can draw together the main threads to show that you've got the full story – 'So you're going to have a really stressful day tomorrow and you're worried about finishing on time, so you want me to pick up the kids on the way back from work.'
- **Encouraging:** To demonstrate that you want to listen and you want to hear more, use minimal encouragers to keep your partner flowing. For example, say something like 'And then what happened?' or 'In what way?' or simply 'Go on.'
- **Being quiet:** Make sure that you don't do all the talking. Give plenty of space for your partner to speak, and allow quiet times when she can think about what she wants to say next. While this is happening, make sure that you don't get distracted and start fidgeting or writing tomorrow's shopping list, but continue to attend physically.

Identifying Facets of Relationship Intimacy

When thinking about intimacy and the areas of your relationship that you want to improve, considering exactly what kind of intimacy you want more of can be helpful. The five facets of relationship intimacy are:

- **Emotional intimacy:** Being similar in your emotional expression. That may mean crying or shouting at the same sorts of things or that both of you are equally sensitive or robust to emotion.
- **Intellectual intimacy:** Being on the same wavelength. You share thoughts and ideas and feel able to understand each other's thought processes.

- **Physical intimacy:** Being close physically and sharing a meaningful connection through mutual touch, sensuality and sexual pleasure.
- **Recreational intimacy:** Being able to laugh, relax and have fun together through similar needs and interests in non-essential pursuits.
- **Spiritual intimacy:** Being able to share the big stuff with similar levels of passion and fervour. That may be religion, politics, environmental issues, human rights, animal rights or even sharing a passionate belief in nothing at all.

Dealing with Anger in a Relationship

We all get angry with our partners from time to time. Try the following tips to help you to minimise the destructive effects of anger on you and your relationship:

- **Address anger immediately.** When you first start noticing the signs of anger, ask your partner what's happening. Leaving an angry person to nurse her hurt makes things worse, not better.
- **Keep calm.** Anger fuels anger, so the calmer you can remain, the quicker your partner's anger subsides. Shouting at a partner in a rage escalates her anger, and joining a passive aggressive partner in sulking can make the situation continue for ever.
- **Acknowledge your partner's feelings.** Openly saying 'I can see you're angry' and, if appropriate, 'I understand you're angry about . . .' prevents your partner from feeling that she has to *prove* how she feels either by throwing her weight around or retreating into silence.
- **Show that you're listening.** People often continue to be angry because they don't think they're being listened to or taken seriously. Use active listening techniques to be sure that your partner feels heard.
- **Share your feelings.** If you're feeling angry too, then say so. If you're feeling nervous, upset or frustrated by your partner's anger, then share that also. This is especially important with passive aggression, when a partner may want to deny that her behaviour has any impact on you.
- **Be conciliatory.** Behave in a way that demonstrates that you want to make peace. That may mean saying you're sorry or acknowledging your role in a problem, or reaching out physically.
- **Use the broken record technique.** Someone in the middle of a rage often jumps from one point to another without taking time to listen to what you're saying, and someone who's passive aggressive may continue to make the same jibe over and over again.

The broken record technique can help you to stick to your guns, and to the point. Simply repeat, calmly but assertively, what you want to say. For example, 'This was a misunderstanding, I didn't mean what I said the way you heard it' or 'I know you're angry, but I can't change my work commitments.'

- **Try fogging.** This is a helpful technique to fend off unreasonable criticism, whether that's through the nagging of passive aggression or in the midst of an angry outburst. Rather than arguing with your partner, you take the wind out of her sails by agreeing in part, or *fogging*.

For example, if your partner's accusing you of being selfish all the time, say, 'I agree that sometimes I don't think about the impact things have on you and I should try harder.' Or if she's angry with you for being late, you can say, 'I'm sorry I was unavoidably late, and I should have rung you earlier to let you know.'

- **Make a negative assertion:** When criticism's deserved, however it's expressed, you may often be tempted to become defensive or try to justify yourself. Negative assertion stops an argument in its tracks by calmly and seriously agreeing with what's been said. You say, 'You're right, I was wrong, I shouldn't have . . . '

Rules for Effective Communication

Communicating effectively is the keystone to any relationship. Use the tips in this list to make sure your message gets across – and to help you listen to what you're being told.

- **Be clear on the objective of the conversation:** Before you open your mouth, make sure that you know why you're doing so. No communication is effective unless you know what you're hoping to achieve by it.
- **Choose your timing:** Make sure that you're both as relaxed as possible, have plenty of time and can't be interrupted.
- **Stick to the matter in hand:** Don't try to get everything of your chest at once. Keep focused on the issue you need to deal with.
- **Avoid starting sentences with 'You . . .':** Don't start out with an accusation – or by sounding as though you're making one.
- **Never say never or always:** Categorical statements are provocative and unlikely to be true. Cut them out.
- **Watch your shoulds and shouldn'ts:** Unless you honestly believe that you have the right to take the moral high ground and preach to your partner, don't do it
- **Don't interrupt:** Even if you're 100 per cent sure that your partner's got nothing else worth saying, keep shtum and let him finish. If you want your partner to become a better talker, then first you must become a better listener.
- **Stay calm or postpone the conversation:** When people get angry, reason tends to disappear. Relax or take a time out.
- **Avoid sarcasm, monologues or mind reading:** Don't try to manipulate the situation to your advantage. If you speak to your partner or act in a way that you'd never dream of doing with your boss, then ask yourself why.
- **Express your feelings as well as your opinions:** Saying that you feel unvalued when he's late explains not just what the problem is, but the effect that the problem is having on you.