

CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE
Extension Specialist, Family Systems

Intimate relationships take hard work. They do not just happen — they require constant attention. But people rarely think about how they communicate with loved ones until there is a conflict. A relationship can become stronger and more satisfying by:

- focusing on your friendship with the other person,
- recognizing when your partner wants to connect with you and responding in ways that increase your connection with each other, and
- learning how to manage your differences to protect your relationship.

The Power of Friendship

Strong friendships are important in people's lives, and they are especially important in marriages and intimate relationships. However, sometimes keeping a friendship with a partner can be more difficult than with a friend. If a couple has developed a strong friendship with each other, it can carry them through the rough times in their lives. How do you build a friendship with your partner?

Share everyday happenings with each other.

When you communicate with a friend, you may share the small details of your life and your feelings, too. The same thing needs to happen in an intimate relationship, regardless of how long you have been together. Couples who have lived together for many years may think they know everything there is to know about the other person. But you change over time. Unless couples continually share, your partner may have no idea how you have changed in your thinking and your reactions to the world around you. Young couples who have an active and growing family may think they do not have time to share and spend time together. That can be dangerous to their relationship because they may find themselves growing apart and not turning to each other when things get rough. Having a deep friendship helps you turn toward, rather than away, from that special person during both good and bad times.



Show fondness and admiration. Sometimes it is easier to criticize and find fault, rather than recognize positive qualities about the special person in your life. Expressing fondness, encouragement, admiration, and appreciation toward each other — often in small and unexpected ways — goes a long way in maintaining strong couple relationships. Expressing simple sentiments such as these can make a difference:

“Thank you for helping out.”

“That was nice of you to call my mother.”

Good relationships are more easily maintained when there are five positive interactions for every one negative interaction. This 5:1 ratio helps keep a relationship out of trouble over time.

Showing fondness and admiration are difficult when people begin to put a negative spin on their history together. It takes effort to stop the negative thoughts and remember the good times and how valuable that person was to you in times past. Forcing yourself to have positive thoughts about your partner when you are apart helps set the stage for more positive interactions when you are together.

The Power of Turning Toward Each Other

A person can reach out for connection with his/her special partner by saying something when the other person is not necessarily expecting it or making a

friendly gesture like a hug or smile. The other partner has three options for responding to these bids. The response can be:

1. turning toward,
2. turning away, or
3. turning against.

Attempt at Communication	1. Turning Toward Response	2. Turning Away Response	3. Turning Against Response
"I have to get to work early tomorrow to finish a project."	"That's too bad. What kind of project is it?"	"This is a great TV program."	"You don't expect me to get up with you, do you?" (Said in an angry or sarcastic tone.)

Here is an example:

Consistently “turning toward” attempts at connection build a stable, long-lasting relationship. “Turning away” is ignoring or disregarding the other person’s efforts to connect. If it becomes a pattern, it can be extremely hard on a long-term relationship. Couples who constantly “turn away” from each other shut down their positive communication and have less experience in sharing humor, affection, and interest in each other. They get lonely although they are together. They are less prone to enjoy each other and solve problems together. The third response, “turning against,” can often be negative and angry and is not healthy for a good relationship. Notice how the third example began with “You ...,” which often can provoke defensiveness in the other person if spoken in a harsh and blaming way. Although the third response is hard on a relationship, at least the couple is not ignoring each other. A pattern of “turning toward” in everyday conversation contributes to the 5:1 ratio in building a strong friendship that can help a couple work through difficult situations.

The Power of Managing Differences in Ways that Protect the Relationship

You may think the perfect couple never has conflict. First of all, that is impossible. Secondly, healthy conflict and disagreement are crucial to strengthening a long-term marriage or relationship. It may seem like you are “turning against” each other, but arguments and disputes do not have to drive couples apart — it is how you argue that makes the difference.

First and foremost, always be respectful even when fighting. Calling each other names and other disrespectful behavior hurts a relationship even if you apologize later. Harmful words and actions are not easily forgotten. Think about your body language. Does it send a message of wanting to work together? Think about your tone of voice. Is it sarcastic and angry or does it send a message that you want to work out the conflict? Think about how you listen. Are you willing to listen and not interrupt? Or are you always more concerned about telling your side and “winning” the argument? Do you let your emotions fly out of control? Or do you stop and think before you speak and act? Think about the timing in bringing up an issue. Is your partner busy doing something else or is it a good time for both of you?

Conflicts that start softly tend to end on a more positive note. Here are some tips to start difficult conversations that are less likely to spin out of control:

1. Start with your heart. Be sensitive to the other person, remembering that this is someone you love regardless of your differences.
2. Begin with something positive that expresses appreciation and gratitude. “I know we both care about being with our families during holidays.”
3. Start with “I” instead of “you.” Example: “I would like us to get in a routine for our holidays so we do not have to fight about it each time.” Think about how your tone of voice and body language can show you are not blaming or attacking the other person.
4. Refuse to stockpile a long list of complaints. The other person will easily become defensive or shut down if you go on and on about the issue. State your needs and desires without attacking or blaming. Make the message brief.
5. Be willing to listen to the other person without interrupting, even when you disagree. In your own words, tell the other person what you think he or she is saying. It may take several times back and forth for each of you to understand exactly what the other person is saying. You may be surprised that some assumptions about your partner are wrong.
6. Work to come up with several options without passing judgment on each option. This is a

brainstorming time. If you immediately dismiss each of your partner's ideas, that person is likely to stop participating in this process.

7. Begin to think about the pros and cons of each option and be ready to "give and take."
8. Agree on an option, but be willing to revisit the situation after a specific time to evaluate the option. If not, the two of you need to think about another option.
9. Show your appreciation to your partner for respectfully working through the issue.

Calm your body in times of conflict. Think about ways your body reacts to conflict (for example, tight jaw, racing heart, pounding headache, tight neck muscles). Think of ways that work for you in reducing body stress (such as opening and closing jaws, deep breathing, walking, stretching neck muscles). Use the techniques that work for you to get your body calmed down during a conflict. You may need to ask for a time out to get your body and emotions under control, but agree on a time to come back together. Try to have positive thoughts about the other person and the good times the two of you have had in the past as you are calming down. It takes about 20 minutes for the body to resume a normal heartbeat and pulse when it has been stressed out.

Be willing to compromise in ways you both can live with. This means you have to listen with an open and honest ear to each other's perspective and feelings about an issue. Compromising and letting the other person influence you helps to decrease the hurt and pain so the problem does not eat away at the relationship. It also helps to develop understanding and patience with each other's faults.

Honor each other's hopes and dreams. Many problems between two people result from conflicting hopes and dreams that have not been thoroughly discussed. Get inside the other person's world by listening when that person is ready to talk. You may not agree with the hopes and dreams the other person has, but listening attentively may eventually open the door for more discussion. Prying needlessly or trying to give advice will shut off the other person's willingness to share. Being interested in each other's hopes and dreams is often hard work.

A few last thoughts . . .

Healthy relationships thrive in an atmosphere where each person feels comfortable talking honestly and openly about important things. In this way, minor issues can be talked about before they become big issues that can damage the relationship. Just as importantly, a satisfying relationship is about having a sense of connection to the other person. It is about spending time with the other person and having fun together. Humor that is not sarcastic can be a great way of reaching out to your partner — it helps you laugh together. Establishing rituals that connect you to each other can be very important as well. It can be as simple as saying goodbye in a special way in the morning as you go your separate ways or making time to share the day's events at the end of the day. If you have a long-distance relationship, you will need to become more creative in how you stay connected on a regular basis.

To Be One With Each Other

What greater thing is there for two human souls,
than to feel that they are joined together to strengthen
each other in all labor, to minister to each other in all sorrow,
to share with each other in all gladness,
to be one with each other in the
silent unspoken memories.

By George Eliot (*Mary Ann Evans*)
(edited version)

This fact sheet, leader's guide, and presentation are not the same as counseling. The CoupleTALK information provides a process for making a good relationship better. If you find your marriage or partnership in serious trouble, you are advised to seek counseling or therapy to restore the foundation of your relationship.

For more information on healthy relationships, contact your Kansas District/County Extension Agent in Family and Consumer Sciences or go to the website: www.ksre.k-state.edu/fs/extension

Thanks to the following persons who reviewed this lesson:

Debra Bolton, Ph.D., CFLE; Rebecca McFarland, B.S.

Written by: Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE
Extension Specialist, Family Systems

Publications from Kansas State University are available at:
www.ksre.ksu.edu

Publications are reviewed or revised annually by appropriate faculty to reflect current research and practice. Date shown is that of publication or last revision. Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Charlotte Shoup Olsen, *CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship, Fact Sheet*, Kansas State University, August 2015.

**Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and
Cooperative Extension Service**

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, John D. Floros, Director.