

Three Steps to Healthier Communication with Your Partner

On a fundamental level, human beings need to feel understood. This is the foundation upon which almost all relationships – be they personal or professional – must be built.

Our emotions are like rubber balls bouncing around inside us. They cause us continual inner turmoil that continues to escalate as the balls continue to bounce back and forth. Similarly, it is difficult to feel settled when we do not feel understood. When we articulate how we are feeling, it is like throwing a ball to our listener. If we feel that our listener has understood us, it is as though he has “caught” the ball and it is no longer bouncing back and forth. It is in our best interests to help our listener catch the ball (understand how we are feeling), which will provide us with a sense of relief.

In a ball game, you need a good catcher. But if the pitcher’s aim is way off, it doesn’t matter how good the catcher is. Similarly, in a relationship, being an effective speaker is just as essential as being a good listener; we can’t expect our partners to understand us if we are not expressing ourselves effectively. We can help our listeners to “catch the ball” through effective communication – throwing it directly to them, rather than way out in left field.

Over the years, in working with dozens of couples, I have had consistently positive results breaking communication skills down into three simple steps:

- 1) expressing “feeling statements,”
- 2) conveying empathy, and
- 3) taking turns toward resolution.

This three-step method has been foolproof in streamlining communication for the better and restoring emotional connection in couples. As in a game of catch, this simple model involves taking turns speaking and actively listening.

Step 1. One person begins in the role of the speaker (pitcher), while the other person takes the part of *active* listener (catcher). The speaker’s primary goal is to throw the ball directly to the catcher – to express himself using “feeling language.” The listener’s goal is to listen without interrupting, putting herself in the speaker’s shoes in order to best “catch the ball,” or understand the feelings that are being conveyed. Fulfilling these roles can be more difficult than it sounds – especially for those of us who do not feel comfortable discussing our emotions.

It is sometimes helpful to break Step One down further into two steps:

- 1) identifying your feelings and
- 2) expressing them.

If you cannot identify what you are feeling, begin by labeling it as simply “discomfort.” Once you recognize that you are uncomfortable, ask yourself what is prompting the discomfort. A situation or a recounted conversation may help clarify the feelings you are having. Ask yourself, “how am I uncomfortable?” and then “what is causing me to feel this way?”

As you identify your feelings, the next step is to put them in “feeling terms.” If you aren’t entirely sure how you feel. Begin by putting your thoughts into feeling statements. While initially clumsy, this will almost always yield effective results.

Your “feeling statement” should begin with the words “I feel” followed by a feeling (sad, worried, happy, frustrated, encouraged, etc) and an optional request. The formula is “When X [event] happens, it makes me feel Y [one or more feelings].” You may also add “I would like it if Z [optional request].” For example: "I feel worried about getting everything done today and I feel scared that I can't get it all done without your help. I would feel more comfortable if I knew in what ways I could lean on you today." This formula is better than asking your partner, "You're cooking dinner tonight, right?" or telling him "Don't forget you're on for dinner tonight" because it invites your listener to empathize with you and respond with understanding.

Empathy is hardwired into human beings as a natural, inborn response to the expression of emotion. Anthropologists believe the empathic response is actually a survival tool that allows for the propagation of the species. Empathy allows us to attend to the primitive needs of our dependent offspring, who, without verbal language skills for their early years, convey their needs through emotional and nonverbal expression. If we didn't have empathic skills, we would neither understand what our babies needed nor be able to provide it for them.

Be careful to follow the feeling prompt with an actual feeling and not with the words "like," "that," or "as though." These words turn the statement of a feeling into a thought, and invite a listener to interject his own thoughts rather than to empathize with how you're feeling.

Watch how adding the word "like" changes the whole statement and sets up the expresser to make a judgment about the listener: "I feel like you might forget that you promised to cook dinner tonight. I'm really stressed about everything I have to do today, and I don't feel like I can handle thinking about dinner on top of it all." While the speaker has suggested that she feels worried and overwhelmed and that she needs the listener's help, she has actually used the words "I

feel" to cloak an accusation, thereby inviting her partner to respond defensively about whether he made that promise or intends to keep his promise.

Here is another example, "When you watch me get dressed in the morning and suggest I wear something else, it makes me feel self-conscious, sad, and worried that you don't like how I look. I also feel frustrated that as hard as I'm working to please people at work and in my family, I seem to be failing. This makes me feel defeated and stuck. Sometimes I even feel tempted to give up, since no matter how hard I try it never seems to be enough. I would like it if you could remember how sensitive I am to these issues before you comment on my clothing in the morning. I wish you could instead tell me things that you like, or ask me how I like something."

In contrast, if the speaker were to say, "I feel as though all you do is criticize me when you watch me get dressed in the morning and suggest I wear something else. I feel like I can't do anything right no matter how hard I try," she would in essence be inviting the listener to defend himself and argue her assumptions. Yes, she is implying the frustration and deflation she feels, but the focus of her statement is on the listener's actions rather than on her own feelings, and she would therefore miss the mark of evoking the listener's compassion and empathy for the way she feels.

Here's another example. Instead of saying "You aren't interested in having conversations at night, so what's the point in my staying sober?" – which sounds like an accusation – you could say, "When I come home excited to see you and tell you about my day, I feel rejected and sad when you don't say hello to me or when you seem disinterested in talking. I know you need your down time after a long day, and yet I can't help feeling rejected when you don't have any extra energy for me. Sometimes I feel sad that you don't seem to want to hear about my day or the things that are important to me. So instead of feeling any more rejected, I avoid talking to you and pour myself a glass of wine. I realize you may not even know that I wanted your attention, but it's just too hard to put myself out there and risk being rejected, so I withdraw."

Look at how substituting "feel like" for actual feelings changes the entire statement: "When I come home and am excited to see you and tell you about my day, I feel like you don't even want to say hello to me, let alone talk to me. I know you need your down time after a long day, and yet I feel like you don't have any extra energy for me. Sometimes I feel like you don't want to hear about my day or the things that are important to me, and instead of feeling any more rejected, I feel like avoiding talking to you and instead pouring myself a glass of wine. I realize you may not even know that I wanted your attention, but it's just too hard to put myself out there and risk being rejected, and so I withdraw." While feelings are still being conveyed, the listener is put on the defensive and may feel the need to correct what he thinks are misperceptions. This prevents him from responding with empathy to the feelings that the speaker has conveyed.

The strategy is simple – and it is foolproof – but it is far from easy. When you take the energy and the time to put anything you need to say in terms of your feelings, you are giving your listener the opportunity to respond with understanding and empathy.

While you are expressing yourself, your partner must actively listen without interrupting. Once you have put your feelings into feeling terms and taken your turn at speaking, it is your turn to listen while your partner takes her turn at conveying what she has heard in an empathic response.

Step 2. After the speaker has effectively communicated his feelings, it is now time for the listener to demonstrate that she heard what was said as she actively listened to the speaker's feelings. And it is now the speaker's turn to listen. You don't need a degree in counseling or psychology to do this; you simply has to have listened for the feelings that were expressed when the speaker was speaking. Listen for his or her feelings and imagine how it would feel to be in his or her skin. In other words, put yourself completely in the speaker's shoes until you can imagine feeling the way he or she describes. This is the closest you can get to feeling someone else's feelings – and it is a powerful communication skill, tool

As mentioned above, empathy is a survival tool that is hardwired into human beings so that we can provide for the needs of our young and propagate the species. So try not to doubt your natural empathic skills – turn on your listening ears and try to understand how your partner is feeling and why.

As with expressing ourselves in “feeling language,” there are several sub-steps to empathy. The first is actively listening and putting yourself in someone else's shoes so that you can imagine feeling exactly how they feel. The second step is communicating that understanding to the speaker. And the third step is checking whether or not you got it right.

When listening to a person's self-expression, actively try to put yourself in his or her shoes. While the speaker is speaking, avoid thinking of all the brilliant points you want to make in response – an exercise that prevents you from listening attentively what the speaker is saying and is sure to make the second step harder. Instead, make it your job to listen so closely to the speaker's point of view that you can see the situation exactly how he sees it and imagine feeling the same way he feels.

Once the speaker finishes speaking, it is the listener's turn to express empathy. Turn your active listening into an empathic statement that shows the speaker you understand. Tell the speaker what you heard him say and that, after seeing the situation through his eyes, you can understand why he feels the way he feels; then ask him whether you got it right. If you can't truthfully say that you understand what or how the speaker feels, then ask him to clarify his

feelings for you until you can. It is critical that you understand and convey in your own words the “what” and the “why” of the speaker’s feelings before moving on to your response. This is the heart of conveying empathy. It is critical for the speaker to feel you empathize with him so that he can prepare for the coming role switch from speaker to listener.

Let’s use the first “feeling statement” from Part I of this article as an example. “I feel worried about getting everything done today, and feel scared I can’t get it all done without your help. I would feel more comfortable if I knew in what ways I could lean on you today.” An empathic response would first involve the listener putting himself in the speaker’s shoes, then conveying his empathic understanding and, finally, checking his accuracy before responding. He might say something like, “I can understand how anxious you are feeling about the day ahead and how much you have to do. You aren’t sure you can manage it all by yourself and are wondering if I will be helpful to you, in particular around making dinner, as we discussed. I can understand how stressful it is to feel overwhelmed and unsure of whether I’ll keep my promises. Is that right?”

In this example, the listener conveys that he has heard what the speaker has said, and he has thought about her experience through her perspective such that he can understand how she feels and why she feels that way – irrespective of how he, the listener, sees the situation or of how the speaker’s worries make him feel. He has communicated his understanding of her feelings in his own words, and has checked with her to see if he has understood correctly before moving on.

I know this sounds like a lot to do, but it can be a snap once you get used to actively listening. When we really listen to someone, we are too engrossed in their narrative to get distracted thinking about ourselves and our own experience. And communicating what we have heard is easy once we are really listening. This mindset of listening when it is our turn to listen helps us to remember our partner’s experience and conveys to our partner that we care and are invested in helping him or her to feel understood. The better we do this, the sooner we will have a turn to be the speaker and explain how we feel.

Step 3. Back and forth toward resolution: Once the listener has conveyed empathy to the speaker’s satisfaction, the speaker feels heard – the ball has been caught and is no longer bouncing around – and the urgency of his feelings is diminished enough for him to shift roles from that of the speaker to that of the listener. At this point, the roles reverse and the listener becomes the speaker. She is now free to respond to what she has heard, expressing herself in “feeling terms.” Her partner becomes the listener, following the same guidelines (in Step Two) of actively listening, not interrupting, and readying himself to convey empathy.

Once the new listener conveys empathy for what he has heard to the satisfaction of the new speaker, the listener goes back to his initial role of speaker. This back-and-forth continues as long as it is necessary to reach resolution.

The back-and-forth of feeling expression and active listening naturally yields efficient resolutions. For, once feelings are expressed and understood (the ball is caught), we can think more clearly without being unduly influenced by our feelings (the bouncing ball). We are also able to be mindful of our partner's feelings because we are not being distracted by our own. Problem-solving from this perspective of mutual empathy is the most powerful tool available in the realm of couples communication.

Through this process of mutual understanding, feelings of conflict are diminished and solutions naturally emerge. Sometimes the resolution is simply the restoration of emotional closeness between partners because the conflict has subsided. Other times, empathic communication sets the stage for thoughtful and compassionate compromise.

Once we feel understood, we can see and feel the areas in which we are willing to stretch and allow room for give-and-take. And it is only in feeling heard that we are ever able to stretch our limits or to make room for compromise. Indeed, feeling understood is a prerequisite for change. Until we feel understood, our feelings tie us up, and often drive our behavior in maladaptive and avoidant directions that can become tough to detangle. Learning how to express ourselves optimally, and how to listen actively are the basic skills needed for effective communication in couples. These communication skills give couples a way to reduce uncomfortable feelings, and efficiently forge compromises during challenging times. More importantly, these skills provide the foundation for intimacy building that in turn maintains the attachment and flexibility we need to keep our relationships alive and healthy.