

ACTIVITY CARD: How to Fight Right

Couple**TALK**

Enhancing Your Relationship

NOTE: If your partner is unwilling to participate in these activities, accept that decision. You may want to share your new knowledge with your partner at times when it seems appropriate, but do not criticize or blame your partner for not doing these activities. It is possible for an individual to gain from this information even if the partner chooses not to participate.

How you handle disagreements and conflicts is just as important to a relationship as how much you love each other.

Part 1.

Whenever a hard issue comes up between you and your partner do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel your body get tense? Learn to recognize when you first become flooded with strong emotions, and make a very conscious attempt to calm yourself down. It will not be easy, but try to find ways that work for you. If you learn to recognize this feeling and have a plan in place, you will be able to short-circuit harmful ways of reacting.

Helpful Examples Are:

- ☆ Take deep breaths.
- ☆ Try muscle relaxation by purposely tensing and then relaxing your muscles.
- ☆ Take time-outs. It may seem artificial at first to say to your partner that you need an intermission when a tough issue comes up. Let your partner know that you are not avoiding the topic—you just need a time-out to be able to settle down to hear your partner's point of view.

List three ways your body reacts when you have strong negative emotions.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List three things you plan to do to calm yourself.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Part 2.

The following questions are designed to help you and your partner better understand how you communicate with each other. Answer how you truly feel, not how you think you should answer. After each of you has answered the questions individually, designate a time to compare and discuss your answers together. If your partner is not willing to discuss these questions, accept his or her decision and refrain from pushing your partner to participate.

A. How do you communicate with your partner?

Note: Successful couples can have many ways of communicating with each other (i.e. yelling, avoiding, listening). What are the keys to their success? They are able to stop fights before they really get out of control. They also show respect to each other, even in conflict.

B. How does your partner communicate? Explain.

C. Do you respect each other's opinions? Explain.

D. Do you feel valued by your partner? Give an example.

E. Do you enjoy each other? Explain.

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Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, KS

MF-2295

January 1997

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File Code: Human Development & Family Relations—3

CS1/98—10M

ACTIVITY CARD: Learning to Listen

CoupleTALK

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Effective listening takes patience and hard work.

Common Listening Problems: Listening with “half an ear,” acting as a judge instead of listening to the whole story, jumping to conclusions, thinking about what to say next, tuning out ideas you disagree with, talking too much.

Part 1.

Ground Rules

Sit down as a couple and take a few minutes to agree on some ground rules to follow when you are having a discussion. It is best to have a few well-stated rules that you agree on rather than lots of general ones. The more you have, the harder it is to remember them. The key is to make rules that you both can support!

Example: “Each of us receives a turn to share our feelings.”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Part 2.

Who Has the Floor?

As you begin to work on your listening skills, try a visual technique that offers a reminder when it is your turn to talk or listen. When a tough issue is presented, give the speaker a ball or key (or some object that is agreeable to both of you) to hold while he or she is talking. When the speaking partner is finished and is satisfied with the other partner’s paraphrasing, pass the object to the other partner and listen while he or she talks.

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ACTIVITY CARD: Expressing Yourself

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It's important to take ownership for your feelings by using "I" statements rather than "you did this...." statements.

Good "I" messages contain three parts:

- ☆ A feeling.
- ☆ A situation or behavior.
- ☆ A need or consequence.

A good model for sending "I" messages is:

"I feel.....when you.....because I need"

Part 1.

"I" Statement Practice

Choose any subject that interests you and tell your partner about it for a few minutes. Examples might include:

- ☆ A leisure activity
- ☆ A favorite book
- ☆ A current event

After listening to the information, give your partner the chance to paraphrase what you said. Let him or her know whether the message you sent was received as you intended. If not, clarify what you said and have your partner paraphrase it again. Repeat until the paraphrase is correct, and then switch roles.

Part 2.

Practice With a Minor Conflict

Repeat the same procedure as in Part 1, but choose a topic that causes minor conflict between the two of you. Be willing to practice this activity several times.

Part 3.

Review of a Fight

During the next several days, if you start having a fight with your partner, call a time out and review what is going on. Ask yourself if your verbal and non-verbal communication is causing the fight to escalate. Are you putting your partner down, criticizing, namecalling, ignoring, or bringing up the past?

Take specific steps to change those patterns of behavior that are not showing respect toward your partner. If the disagreement is extremely heated, do not hesitate to call a time out, think about your behavior, and agree on a later time to return to the discussion.

Part 4.

Different Ways of Communicating

Think about the different ways in which the two of you communicate that might be related to gender and cultural differences. For example, one of you may have been taught to show emotions—the other may have not.

Think about which things cause problems between the two of you and which do not. Be willing to think about those issues that can never be resolved and how you can deal with them. One issue might be differences in how each of you prefers to spend leisure time. How can you deal with this type of issue? How can each of you compromise?

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ACTIVITY CARD: Managing Expectations

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Couples expect a lot from their marriage or partnership. Dissatisfaction occurs when expectations are not met. Some of the more common marital problems revolve around sex, housework and money. Effective communication skills can help couples deal with these issues.

Part 1.

What is Important to Me?

Before you start getting upset about a tough issue, ask yourself the following questions:

- ☆ Do I really know what I expect?
- ☆ Is it reasonable?
- ☆ Have I clearly explained it to my partner?
- ☆ How have I tried to understand my partner's feelings?

Part 2.

A Review of our Rules

This purpose of this activity is to increase your awareness of the rules that operate in your relationship. You will learn to distinguish between rules that are practiced consciously and those that operate subconsciously. You will also recognize the difference between rules that can be openly mentioned and those that are to remain unspoken. This activity may take more than one time to complete.

EXAMPLES of PARTNER RULES are LISTED on the BACK

Examples of Partner Rules:

- ☆ One partner writes all the checks and balances the checkbook.
- ☆ When one partner cooks the evening meal, the other partner does the dishes.
- ☆ One partner always initiates lovemaking.

After Making a List of Rules, Answer the Following:

1. Overall, are the rules helpful?
2. Which rules need to be discarded? Revised? Clarified?
3. Which rules are direct and clear? Which rules have operated subconsciously?
4. How are rules made between us?
5. How can a rule be changed if one partner decides that he or she does not like a rule?
6. As a couple, what do we want to accomplish through the use of rules?

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ACTIVITY CARD: The Balancing Act

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Time for yourself is not a luxury, but a necessity. We can't adequately nurture our relationship if we don't take time to replenish and refresh ourselves. Also, time as a couple is not a luxury, but a necessity. We must nurture our partnership if it is to grow and flourish.

No one can do it all—balancing is about choices, values, priorities, sacrifices and compromises. It is critical for you and your partner to continually think about tasks that can be shared, simplified, or even discarded.

Part 1.

Priorities

An important element in achieving balance is setting priorities. Under each heading, list things you would like to accomplish or do.

HOUSEHOLD *Example: Have a clean house at all times.*

RELATIONSHIP *Example: Make time to talk alone with my partner each day.*

PERSONAL *Example: Exercise 15 minutes each day.*

WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME *Example: Get to work on time.*

Write an "E" next to any task you would be willing to eliminate; "D" for any you would be willing to delegate; and "S" for any you would be willing to simplify (reduce). Prioritize the remaining items and compare your list with your partner's list. Continually ask yourself:

- ☆ What is really important in my life?
- ☆ What must I maintain in my life to achieve a sense of fulfillment?
- ☆ To allow our relationship to grow, what might I be able to let go of, eliminate, delegate or share?

Part 2.

Effective Problem-solving

Examine one problem in your household that, if improved upon, could help balance your life as a couple. Go through the following problem-solving steps:

STOP: Recognize the problem you and your partner are having. Control your emotions so that you can talk about it.

LOOK & LISTEN: Clearly define the problem. You may find that a large problem needs to be broken into parts.

THINK: Brainstorm all possible solutions—focus on being both creative and non-judgmental. When the brainstorming is finished, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of all solutions and describe how you feel about each one.

ACT: Agree on a solution—it may take compromise by both of you. Implement your solution, then check with your partner at a later time to see if the solution is working.

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ACTIVITY CARD: Best Friends

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Making time to be together and talk as friends is important. Set some ground rules for these occasions if you need to. Get away from all interruptions, and do not allow yourselves to talk about problems—only talk about things that are mutually interesting. Use listening and speaking skills that nurture your relationship.

Part 1.

Your Partner's Good Qualities

Individually, write down ten actions you like your partner to do. Choose these by yourself and do not peek at your partner's list. Here are some examples: hold my hand, call me a pleasing name, have patience when I make a mistake, try to cheer me up, thank me for doing something.

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

Share your list with each other and think about the following:

- ☆ Were there any actions on your partner's list that surprised you?
- ☆ Were there any actions on your list that surprised your partner?

Part 2.

Emotional Bank Account

Our emotions are like a bank account. If we have more negative emotions (withdrawals) than positive ones (deposits), we are in very bad shape. The next time you are tempted to share a negative emotion, replace it with a positive one instead.

Try to follow the account guideline: *"five positives for every negative."* Check your emotional balance before you make a negative withdrawal. To help you with your emotional bank account, start each day with a positive comment to your partner and end each day the same way. Positive messages can be relayed in many ways: in person, by phone, by written notes, etc.

Part 3.

Time Together

Plan time alone with your partner this week. It may be as simple as taking a 30-minute walk around your neighborhood. Make ground rules to allow yourselves an enjoyable time, such as agreeing to not talk about certain things. Try making this activity a weekly occurrence. You may even want to take turns planning something special for the two of you to do on a regular basis.

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