Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Enhancing a relationship through communication

Relationships require a lot of work and commitment. And with everyone juggling many priorities in today's modern era, maintaining a relationship can sometimes fall through the cracks. Research shows



that couples who know how to talk out their concerns are less likely to have a breakdown in their relationship. However, it's important to realize that there are different levels of communication. For instance, a couple may be able to communicate their day-to-day concerns such as paying bills or looking after children, but they are more likely to have a successful relationship if they can also communicate on a deeper level. This can simply mean letting each other know they are appreciated, loved and valued.

Barriers to communication

A root of the communication problems for many couples is the unspoken expectations they have of each other. And although many people may have known their partner inside and out sometime ago, many factors could have changed. It's important for couples to talk about these changes and redefine their relationship to meet present expectations.

Many people do not feel safe enough to express pain and difficulties to their partners. Others avoid discussing important issues because they fear that they may lose a measure of control. And still others feel threatened by differences of opinion.

Another significant barrier to communication is the fact that men and women typically express themselves differently. Some men have a difficult time expressing their feelings. Our society has taught and expected men to be more rational and logical in their conversations, while women tend to be more expressive.

Ways to improve communication

What can couples do to improve communication with each other? Here are suggestions that you might consider:

- **Learn to accept your differences.** This involves the realization that often what is gained from talking it out is an understanding of your partner, instead of agreement on an issue. If a person feels threatened by differences of opinion, he or she will usually close the book on a subject without discussion. When this happens, part of a person is not accessible and alienation could result. Then, the couple feels that they don't know each other or, perhaps, even understand each other.
- **Talk it out from a position of equality.** This simply means that one of the partners should not be in command and assume the attitude of, *"I know what is best—you do what I say."*
- **Don't start blaming.** Blaming is an aggressive style of communication and will close the avenues of communication, instead of opening them.
- **Respect your partner's need for privacy.** Sometimes people hold back a little when communicating. In other words, they're not as sharing as their partner. It's important to realize

that what is at issue here is not honesty. Usually, it’s simply a need for privacy. People have different comfort levels for intimacy—this is normal. For example, it’s important for people to understand that it’s normal to have different levels of comfort with intimacy.

- **Be an attentive listener.** Many of us do not listen to our partner's problems because we feel we have to accept the burden of solving them. We must realize that what most people want is to be heard and understood so that their pain and hurt can be acknowledged.
- **Recognize that you cannot be all things to all people.** There may be times when you or your partner may have to turn to friends for support. For instance, a woman who is grieving over her mother's death may find that her husband doesn’t want to talk about her loss because it brings back painful memories of his mother's death.
- **Give positive verbal strokes to each other.** Instead of pointing out your spouse's faults, try complimenting him or her. Everyone has strengths and everyone likes to be validated.
- **Watch your non-verbal communication.** For example, a person who reads the newspaper or watches TV while their partner is trying to talk is conveying the message, *"I'm not interested in what you’re saying. My needs are different at this time."*

After you try out a few of the above suggestions, you could find the results encouraging enough to want to go on to learn more.

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