



# GROW YOUR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP<sup>©</sup>

Tips for Applying the  
Communication Skills Cards

**These Communication Skills are some of the most useful and effective tools you will have for hearing and understanding each other better, and in particular, for resolving any misunderstandings or conflicts that might arise in your relationship. The following are discussions of these individual Communication Skills, including some examples to illustrate how they work:**

**CHECK-INS “How are we doing?”**

Check-Ins are such an easily understood concept, but so often forgotten.

Check-Ins, when used on a regular basis (perhaps once a week?) is an opportunity to identify any issues that are coming up for either of the partners, and that deserve attention before the issue starts to fester, leading to resentments or hurt feelings.

A Check-In can start with a simple question, “How are we doing?”, and then allowing your partner the space to voice their issues or concerns. The first partner’s role is to listen, to validate and to understand what their partner is saying. The tone of the Check-In should be one of collaboration and respect, with an intention of working together to resolve any issues that are voiced by either partner. Once the topic has been brought to the table, the partners can then discuss it openly, and hopefully work towards some agreement that resolves the concern of the one who spoke up.

Remember that the Check-In is for the benefit of both partners, so be sure to leave sufficient time for both partners to have the opportunity to voice their issues.

**An example where a Check-In can be helpful:**

Partner #1: I’m not sure, but it seems that you have been a bit short with me lately, and it feels like you’re even taking steps to avoid me? How are we doing? Is there anything you’d like to share with me?

Partner #2: You’re right, I have been upset lately, but I didn’t want to talk about it, because I know that the topic upsets you. The thing is, my mother wants to visit with us next month to see the baby, but I know how she upsets you, and how things get difficult when she visits. So I didn’t want to bring it up, but she has been pestering me for a date so she can get her airline tickets.

Partner #1: Well thanks for sharing with me. You’re right; your mother’s visits have not always been easy. But, at least I know what’s been bothering you. Let’s sit down and talk about the details, and find a way to sort this out, OK?

Partner #2: Thank you for being willing to talk about it.

**COMPROMISE**      **“Let’s meet each other halfway”**

Compromise, or “meeting each other halfway”, is a highly effective way to break up the log jam of two apparently different viewpoints.

If each partner sticks firmly to their position, while holding the other’s position as “wrong”, then you create a stand-off that generates frustration and negative energy on each side.

On the other hand, if each partner is willing to soften their position a bit, to let in some of their partner’s request, it can create a feeling of hope and cooperation which can bring forth more generosity and openness from each partner.

Ideally, you hold the intention to keep “negotiating” towards a goal that is agreeable to both partners; where each can walk away from that decision feeling heard and validated.

In a compromise, you may not get 100% of what you were initially striving for, but having your partner support you in reaching “some” of your initial goal can feel very rewarding and supportive; knowing that your partner values you and respects your opinions.

**Example:** Here is the start of conversation where each partner has a different opinion about a topic:

Partner #1: You spend so much time with your friends, that it feels like I don’t even matter anymore. I would like you to pay more attention to me, take me out to dinners, to the movies or just spend time with me.

Partner #2: What are you talking about? I spend plenty of time with you, so when I get the chance to be with my friends, I take it. Don’t be so self-centered; I need time to do the things I want to do as well!

Let’s see what happens if one of the partners offers a **COMPROMISE**:

Partner #1: It’s not that I want you to stop seeing your friends; I’m just asking that you and I spend some more quality time together. How about we agree to have at least one weekend each month, just for us? We agree on a date, we put it on the calendar, and we spend those days together. And, we can plan that date together, so you don’t feel it’s all on you. How does that sound?

Partner #2: I can totally do that; and I want to do that with you. You’re #1. At first I thought that you didn’t want me to hang out with my friends ever again, but I hear that you’re OK with them, as long as I make special times for us, and for you. Let’s do that! How about we make plans to do something special this weekend? Will that work for you?

Partner #1: Thank you, and I appreciate you hearing me. That sounds good.

**LISTENING / UNDERSTANDING      “Is this what you mean?”**

Too often, we are not listening to our partner. Instead, while they are talking, we have an inner dialogue going on in our head; often misinterpreting what they are saying as we “fill in the blanks” with our own insecurities or defensiveness. Or if we disagree with what they are saying, we become preoccupied with preparing our rebuttal to their statements. The reality is, we have stopped listening to them, and instead, we are already reacting to what we “think” has just been said.

This skill of “Listening / Understanding” asks us to quiet our own inner dialogue so that we can actually hear what our partner is saying and requesting.

A particularly good technique to help you “listen” to the other is to stop them at various points and repeat back to them what you think you just heard them say.

Your partner will appreciate that you are “mirroring” back what they said, and they can correct any misinterpretation or misunderstanding that may have crept into your listening process, so that you are both on the same page.

Here is an **example** illustrating a typical mistake we make when we “listen” to our partner. Instead of actually hearing what they say, we are busy “filling in the blanks” with our own inner dialogue and programming...

Partner #1: So the next time we go on our camping trip, I really want us to be better prepared and make a check list. We forgot so many things on our last trip !

Partner #2: “Oh, I get it. You’re saying that, “I had better get my act together and be more responsible in preparing for our next trip.” You’re saying that I really ruined our last trip.”

Partner #1: “No, that is not what I was saying. I was speaking about both of us preparing better. I was not blaming you. It is something that I would like both of us to do better next time.”

Partner #2: OK, so let me see if I’ve got this right. So what I hear you saying is that we both need to do a better job of preparing for our camping trip; making sure we have what we need. Is that right?”

Partner #1: “Yes, that is exactly what I was saying. Thank you for hearing me. “

**RESPONDING VS. REACTING**                      **“Let’s take a breath”**

Interactions with another person can sometimes “trigger” or poke us in our vulnerable places. This is especially true when we are having conversations with someone meaningful to us, like our partner.

When we are “triggered”, our knee-jerk reaction is to defend ourselves; whether to put up a wall, or to push back. These are our automatic “reactions” of self-defense, to protect ourselves.

Responding, on the other hand, is purposely slowing down our automatic impulse to defend ourselves and instead remembering that our partner deserves a respectful response, whether we agree with them or not. Sometimes it helps to pause and “take a breath” to slow down the initial impulse to react. By slowing the process down, we can notice what we are feeling inside and perhaps we can ask more questions from the other, to gain more clarity about the topic. We can even repeat back what we “think” we just heard (from **Listening/Understanding**) so that we are not reacting to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

Any efforts towards responding rather than reacting will give you and your partner an opportunity to have a more productive conversation to sort out your differences, and to work towards more understanding and harmony.

Here is an **example** where “taking a breath” can help with a sensitive conversation:

Partner #1: I was balancing the checkbook, and I discovered that you have been spending a lot of money on those health supplements. It’s killing our budget!

Partner #2: I’m buying those for both our benefit. I can’t say the same about those car magazines you keep buying; you don’t even read them. So don’t complain about my spending habits, OK?

Partner #1: This happens everytime we talk about our finances. How about we both “take a breath” and cool down for a moment? OK?

Partner #2: OK.

(After pausing a few moments, Partner #2 has a chance to respond, rather than react)

Partner #2: OK, that helped. I hear your concerns about the cost of those supplements. They are expensive. I can contribute some more money from my account, since I feel they are important for or general health. But I will be mindful and cut back some of the supplements, because they are probably too much for our budget right now.

Partner #1: Thank you, that will really help. And I’ll be more careful about picking those magazines off the shelf at the market. And you’re right; I have a pile of them at home I haven’t even read yet.

**TALK TO ME “Tell me what you need”**

Sometimes, if you feel that your partner has hurt your feelings, you may express your upset by being short with them, or giving them the cold shoulder to “punish” them. By those actions, you mistakenly think that your partner will get the message that you’re upset with them, and that they will take steps to make amends.

However, for this strategy to work, you are relying on “mind-reading”, where your partner will know exactly what has upset you, but without you actually telling them.

In a perfect world, you may think, “If you really loved me, you would know what the problem is”, but in reality, your partner may not know what happened to upset you.

That is why it is so important to speak up and let your partner know, in your own words, what is on your mind. Your partner may not like what is being said, but they will appreciate your words so that they can be on the same page as you. At least, with the issues now on the table, you and your partner can decide what to do next to bring about a true resolution.

**Example:**

Partner #1: I don’t know, you seem irritated with me and you seem to be quarreling with me over small stuff. Is something going on? Did I do something to upset you?

Partner #2: Well if I have to tell you, then what’s the point. You would think that after all of our time together, and if you “really loved me”, that you would know what you did.

Partner #1: Well, I’m sorry that I did something to upset you. But I honestly don’t know what? Could you please tell me...

Partner #2: You had promised to take us on a picnic to our favorite spot last week, but you worked at your office all weekend, and you totally forgot your promise to me. That’s why I’ve been upset.

Partner #1: Oh, you’re right; and I totally forgot about that. I got caught up with a surprise deadline at work, and I just focused on that. I’m so sorry; I know those picnics are special to you and to me. Let’s plan on having that picnic this weekend. Will that work?

Partner #2: Thank you; that feels better. Yes, let’s do that!

**TO WALK IN YOUR SHOES “Now I understand”**

When we have a conversation with another person in which they are expressing a viewpoint different than our own, we sometimes dig in our heels and fight hard for our opinion, trying to prove to the other that “I’m right and you’re wrong.” If both partners take this hard stance, you create a stalemate, which leaves you both feeling frustrated and misunderstood.

On the other hand, if we can listen to the other’s opinion, and try to understand why they feel that way, that is, to “walk in their shoes” for a moment, it may give us more empathy for their point of view.

Let’s look at an **example** of this to better understand this concept of “walking in their shoes.”

Partner #1: I think it is very important that we give our Johnny a big birthday party this year. We have barely celebrated his last three birthdays, and I feel he would really appreciate that.

Partner #2: Why should we spoil him like that. We each get him a gift each year, so why do we need to go through the hassle and expense of a big party. I think he’ll survive without a party.

Partner #1: The reason I’m suggesting a party is because when I was growing up, my parents never threw me a party, and it always made me feel like I didn’t matter. I always envied my friends when they had parties, but I never had one of my own. It didn’t feel good.

Partner #2: Oh, I’m sorry; I didn’t know that. From what you’re sharing with me, you felt like something important was missing from your childhood. I understand better now. So I agree, let’s throw Johnny a great birthday party this year!

Partner #1: Thank you for understanding why I think this is important.

**SPEAKING FROM OUR HEART “Let me say that in a kinder way”**

When you are frustrated with your partner for something they have just said or done, you can become short-tempered and maybe say something to them in a sharp and critical way. This only serves to punish them, which may cause them to lash back, or maybe cause them to feel badly about themselves and withdraw.

Either outcome is unfortunate, because it keeps the two of you from continuing the conversation about what caused the upset in the first place, and instead, you both now feel misunderstood and upset with the other.

If you do speak out sharply, and notice the hurt that you have just caused your partner, you can still get a second chance if you say, “Let me say that in a kinder way”, which will bring your partner back into a receptive space with you.

Here is an **example** of this principle at work:

Partner #1: I see that you haven’t mailed out that bill yet, even though I’ve reminded you several times. I guess I can’t rely on you, and have to do everything myself. Thanks a lot!

Partner #2: I’m sorry. I got caught up with writing that paper for my class. Let me take that bill out to the mail box right now.

Partner #1: Too late; I’ll do it myself. Why can’t you be part of our team?

Partner #2: I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment to you. I can’t seem to do anything right for you these days.

(When Partner #1 sees how the harsh words have made the other partner feel bad about themselves, Partner #1 tries again, but **speaking from the heart.**)

Partner #1: I’m sorry for the harsh words. I was getting worried that the bill wouldn’t get mailed in time, but we actually have another day to send it out, and I know that you have been very busy with your classwork. Would you mind taking care of that? I have some commitments tomorrow morning, so that would be very helpful. Would that work for you?

Partner #2: Yes, thank you for saying that in a kinder way. I hear you, and I will take care of that later today, I promise.



## **USING “I” STATEMENTS      “This is how I feel”**

If there is one rule to learn about good communication, it is to not point at the other, whether with your finger or your words. Once you point at the other, it has the effect of blaming or shaming them, and making them feel that they did something wrong. At that moment, they will likely defend themselves and possibly point back at you, and the “conversation” will essentially be over.

The best way to avoid pointing at the other is to use “I statements”. Let the other know how you’re feeling by speaking about your feelings and experience, rather than making your partner the cause of the issue. Then your partner will not need to become defensive and there is a much better chance that they will hear you more clearly.

Here are some quick examples; first an example of “pointing” at the other, and the second example will show how to say that same thing, but using “I statements.”

### **Example 1: Pointing at the other**

Partner #1: You should be ashamed of how you acted at that party tonight. Instead of staying with me, you quickly walked away and hung out with your friends at the bar the entire night. You never checked in on me, and you totally forgot that I was there. That was very disrespectful behavior.

Partner #2’s (likely reaction): Don’t blame me. You could have joined in on the fun anytime you wanted. But instead, you prefer to be a wet blanket and sulk in the corner. Maybe you shouldn’t have come in the first place?

### **Example 2: The same situation, but using “I statements”**

Partner #1: Do you have a moment? I want to talk about that party tonight. To tell you the truth, I felt very alone tonight. You have a great circle of friends, and I’m glad that you were able to connect with them. But you know I’m a bit shy around people I don’t know that well, so I feel better when you stay by my side and introduce me to everyone. I would have liked to join you at the bar with your friends, but I was feeling a bit timid and shy. At the next party, would you mind staying at my side, and introducing me to all of your friends? I would like that.

Partner #2’s (likely reaction): Oh, I’m sorry that I made you feel alone. When I went to visit my friends at the bar, I just assumed you’d come along to meet them. But you’re right; it would have been much better to have stayed with you and to have introduced you to them. I’m sorry; I’ll be sure to do that next time. OK?

Partner #1: Thank you; that would help me a lot at the next party. Thank you for hearing me.