

5 Communication Pitfalls and Pointers for Couples

Communication is the bedrock of relationships. But when two people with different backgrounds, perspectives and concerns get together, there are many things that can go wrong along the way.

Susan Heitler, Ph.D, a Denver-based clinical psychologist who works with couples and authored the book [The Power of Two: Secrets of a Strong & Loving Marriage](#), shares five common communication pitfalls and practical ways to overcome them.

1. Pitfall: Not knowing the rules.

Constructive communication has various principles, some of which you or your partner might not know naturally. Or you might have different expectations and totally different communication styles.

For instance, your [childhood](#) has a lot to do with how you communicate. “If you grew up in a family where discussion meant debate, you’ll talk very differently than if you grew up in a family where discussion meant sharing perspectives and building new ideas together,” Heitler says.

Also, some people don’t realize that when they’re communicating, they might be doing something that’s hurtful to their partner. Hurtful behaviors include interpreting, criticism and name-calling, Heitler says.

Interpreting can look like this, according to Heitler: While the wife is washing the dishes and the husband is sitting on the couch reading a book, she assumes that he thinks dishes are a woman’s job and that there’s no way that he’d join her let alone be willing to take dishes on as his responsibility. “Her interpretation blocks her from asking to find out how in fact he would feel about shifting their after-dinner routines,” Heitler says.

When it comes to criticism, a wife who feels she’s not being listened to might say, “When I had problems with my co-workers, you blew me off.” Criticism can easily lead to name-calling, Heitler says. The spouse might—in her mind or out loud—call her husband selfish. Such conversations can then escalate into a blowout.

Pointer: Instead of interpreting, ask your partner, “How come you’re reading while I’m washing the dishes?” Heitler says. The answer might be as simple as the husband getting so engrossed in the book that he didn’t even know that she was doing the dishes.

Instead of criticizing your partner, discuss your concerns. If you feel like your partner isn’t listening to you, ask about their reaction. “What did you think about what I said?” If they say that they’d rather not talk about it, you can inquire why.

You can learn more about construction communication [here](#).

2. Pitfall: Aiming for compromise.

You might be surprised to learn that looking for compromise is a pitfall, but compromise produces two losers. As Heitler says, compromise is a “lose-lose solution” for the couple that “leaves both partners feeling compromised.” A win-win solution, by contrast, occurs when her-way meets his-way and creates an our-way, she says.

Pointer: The key is to talk about the specifics of your and your partner’s underlying concerns, and be responsive to them. When you understand both partners’ concerns, the two of you can brainstorm specific solutions. This approach works best when couples take potentially overwhelming issues and break them down into smaller concrete concerns that can be addressed one at a time.

For instance, Heitler worked with a married couple who had disagreements about having kids. He loved his high-intensity job as a trial attorney, for which he worked late nights almost every weekday. She wanted to have a big family, which she said she couldn't handle on her own.

A compromise would've meant her saying that they can have two kids and him saying that he'll get home at six, Heitler says. However, for both partners, this would've been a raw deal.

But when they discussed their underlying concerns, they came up with a win-win solution. To help with the children, they decided to hire nannies, one of whom could stay in the evenings. "Her concern was more about handling children and less about how much time they spent as a couple," Heitler says. But she did have some concern about spending time together. The couple decided that once a month, they'd go on a weekend getaway. Over time, the husband didn't want to miss out on family time, so he ended up cutting his hours anyway.

3. Pitfall: Playing pin the tail on the donkey.

After an upsetting situation, you might think that the goal of looking back at what happened it is to figure out who's at fault. If you're using the words "you should have," that's a giveaway that you're playing the blame game, Heitler says.

Pointer: Look back at your own behavior and ask yourself what you can do differently in the future. As Heitler says, "it's not your job to decide what your partner should do differently but to decide what you could do differently."

Heitler says that signs that you're learning are when you say things like "Next time, I think I will" or "Next time I think I could." Consider starting with these words when brainstorming your own future actions.

4. Pitfall: Letting escalating emotions take over.

"The hotter you get, the more likely it is that you'll race full speed ahead down the criticism and blame road. To stay on the road to mutual understanding and solution-building, avoid overheating," Heitler says. Excessive emotions can derail a conversation and turn it into a full-blown fight.

Pointer: When you're frustrated, angry or upset, it's best to pause the conversation. "Give yourself some time, and even a brief walk into a separate physical space, to calm down," Heitler says.

If you can't seem to de-escalate your emotions, then table the talk for another day. Make an agreement with your partner that when the conversation starts to heat up, you'll stop.

5. Pitfall: Thinking that marriage is like walking — anyone can do it.

This is similar to thinking that you're a good listener just because you can hear. We know that listening requires certain skills. (See [here](#) for tips.)

Heitler says that marriage is more akin to being a professional athlete. It "takes learning complex skills and lots of practice" to make marriage successful, she says.

Pointer: There are tons of marriage and relationship education resources available. For instance, Heitler co-created an online program called [Power of Two](#), which teaches couples a variety of skills, including how to communicate effectively when you have differences, to build healthy and happy relationships. Other resources you can turn to include books, CDs, weekend workshops and therapists.