



National  
Multiple Sclerosis  
Society

# RELATIONSHIP MATTERS: AN ENRICHMENT COURSE FOR COUPLES LIVING WITH MS

Participant Handbook



**JUDY**  
DIAGNOSED IN 1982

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# Introduction

Building a healthier relationship usually involves making changes — changes in how you listen, talk and solve problems with your partner. The information provided in this handbook will enhance your understanding of effective communication, as well as ways to resolve conflicts and strengthen your commitment to your partner and relationship.

## Relationship Matters is designed so participants:

- Recognize common communication problems and ways to correct them.
- Understand different styles for solving problems.
- Develop a plan for de-escalating arguments and conflicts.
- Use effective communication skills for listening and speaking.
- Learn ways to protect and repair relationships.
- Discuss challenges/concerns and ways to strengthen relationships through renewed commitments to one another.

## Things I Want to Learn

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2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## Thoughts:

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## Food for Thought:

In this handbook you will find thoughts and ideas to consider as you travel along your journey to relationship satisfaction. This is your handbook; feel free to doodle, draw, write or scribble in the white spaces. Enjoy!

# Three Types of Safety

**Mastery Skill: Create a safe environment for your partner and be willing to ask that your partner create a safe environment for you when you need it.**

Safety and security are the foundations of a healthy relationship. Regardless of how well one can communicate and problem solve, people rarely utilize those skills without the security of knowing it is safe to take risks, be vulnerable and express oneself. Living in fear of rejection, humiliation, abandonment or physical harm makes it impossible to experience a healthy relationship.

The three kinds of safety listed below are non-negotiable. You cannot have a healthy relationship without all three; you will not feel secure enough to be yourself, so intimacy is impossible. For people living with chronic illness who may rely on loved ones to provide medical care and other essentials, neglect can also threaten a healthy relationship.

## The Three Types of Safety Required for a Healthy Relationship

### **Commitment Safety**

Security of support and a clear, committed future together.

### **Emotional Safety**

Being able to express thoughts and feelings openly and to accept one another's differences.

### **Physical Safety**

Freedom from physical harm, the threat of physical harm, withholding medical care or medication, or other physical needs.

**Adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

### **Note:**

Throughout this handbook, we will refer to different skills for solving conflicts and problems. Though the literature says some volatile relationships can be healthy, not all volatile relationships are stable and healthy. The question to ask yourself to determine if your relationship is a healthy one is, "Do I feel afraid of my partner?" If you are scared of your partner when she or he expresses anger verbally, emotionally, physically or sexually, please see page 47 about getting help.

People with MS may experience cognitive problems, depression and/or mood changes that can result in extreme irritability, aggressiveness and/or verbal abuse. These individuals may have never displayed this kind of behavior prior to their diagnosis with MS. If these kinds of changes occur, it is important to report them to your neurologist or other healthcare professional. The doctor may be able to help, or refer you to someone who can. Medication and behavioral techniques can alleviate some of these symptoms, so it is important to seek help when these behavioral changes occur. It may take time to find the right solution, so be diligent until you get the right answer. Sometimes medications take a while to begin working, or the dosage needs to be adjusted. It is a good idea to keep all follow up appointments and help your health professional by tracking details, such as time and circumstances of any outbursts before, during and after treatment.

Of course, irritability, aggressiveness and various types of verbal and physical abuse can occur even when no one in the family has MS. If these problems were occurring long before you or your partner developed MS, it is important to know that they could possibly worsen because of MS-related mood or cognitive changes. If you or your partner are exhibiting any behaviors that cause concern for the safety of anyone in the household, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE.

## Positive Connections

**Mastery Skill: Protect your relationship from difficult times by creating positive connections. This is also known as making deposits in your “emotional bank account.” Create a culture of positivity.**

Some authors believe that relationships often end due to neglect — a couple’s inability to contribute to the health of the relationship by keeping the positive aspects in the forefront and minimizing negative interactions when they happen.

Dr. John Gottman is world renowned for his work on marital stability and divorce prediction, involving the study of emotions, physiology and communication. Dr. Gottman’s research indicates successful relationships have five times more positive interactions than negative ones during arguments, and up to 20 times more positive than negative exchanges in regular interactions.

### The Erosion Theory

- People don’t just fall out of love.
- Love and positive feelings get eroded over time by poorly handled disagreements and arguments.
- The negative can kill the positive.

**Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

# Emotional Bank Account

Dr. Gottman also writes about “turning toward your partner.” This happens when we make small emotional connections with our partner by doing the little, ordinary things in daily life. The best way to explain this is in banking terms: It is helpful to have a buffer, or savings, built up in terms of positive sentiment in your relationship. Behold, the emotional bank account! It can be very beneficial to fine-tune your awareness of ways to turn these everyday moments into “positive currency” that will increase the balance in your emotional bank account.

In the book **7 Principles for Making Marriage Work**, Dr. Gottman and Nan Silver list sixty-two activities that can translate into positive sentiment. The list includes things such as: eat together (without distraction), reunite at the end of the day (and debrief) about how things went, call (text/email or send positive thoughts to) each other during the day, and more. Dr. Gary Chapman, author of **The Five Love Languages**, states that we can meet the emotional needs of those we love in different ways, and in fact, people have different needs and respond better to some “love languages” than others. You may already know your partner’s primary language; if not, read about the five different types and learn to speak the language if you don’t already.

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**“The world is a great mirror. It reflects back to you what you are. If you are loving, if you are friendly, if you are helpful, the world will prove loving and friendly and helpful to you. The world is what you are.” — Thomas Dreier**

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## Five Love Languages

(From [fivelovelanguages.com](http://fivelovelanguages.com))

**Mastery Skill: Understand the primary love language of your partner to more successfully foster positive connections.**

### Words of Affirmation

Verbal appreciation speaks powerfully to persons whose primary love language is “Words of Affirmation.” Words of encouragement easily translate into love and support.

### Quality Time

Many mates feel most loved when they spend physical time together, doing activities that they love to do. Spending uninterrupted time together will bring a couple closer, and in the years to come, will fill up the emotional bank account.

## Receiving Gifts

Some people respond well to visual symbols of love. If you speak this love language you are more likely to treasure any gift as an expression of love and devotion. People who speak this love language often feel that a lack of gifts represents a lack of love from their mate.

## Acts of Service

Sometimes simple chores around the house can be an undeniable expression of love. Even simple things like laundry and taking out the trash require some form of planning, time, effort and energy. Very often, both partners will speak to the “Acts of Service Language.” However, it is very important to understand what acts of service your mate most appreciates.

## Physical Touch

Many mates feel the most loved when they receive physical contact from their partner. For a mate who speaks this love language loudly, physical touch can make or break the relationship. Learn your partner’s “dialect” by finding his or her favorite acts of touch, whether it is hugging, kissing, holding hands, or lovemaking, and initiate it often.

# Proactive Relationship Management

**Mastery Skill: Accept responsibility for your part in making your relationship a success. Keep your couple time sacred.**

As you can see, we are advocating that you make your relationship a priority. As one workshop participant said, “Being in a relationship is a choice and with that choice comes responsibility for the well-being of the relationship.”

Healthy couples manage their relationship rather than just allowing things to happen. Taking a proactive approach to your relationship will nurture your strengths as a couple. Two management tools we recommend are regular couple meetings and regular dates. It takes a small commitment of your time, but the rewards are plentiful.

## Regular Couple Meetings

- Plan to meet regularly to discuss any issues that have occurred but have not been addressed; issues only grow when left unattended.
- Plan your collective schedules and make time for your relationship.
- Include children only in the part of the meeting that affects them. This teaches valuable life skills — you are their model of how to have a healthy relationship and a good life!
- Begin with dialogue about what has been going well... what you appreciate!

# Date Night

**Date night should be a planned outing that takes priority — with no discussion of problems, in-laws or other stressors.**

Take turns coming up with ideas for date night. It does not need to cost a lot of money; the purpose is to spend time together doing something you enjoy. Watching a movie or rocking together on the porch counts, as long as there are no outside influences.

**Think of five places to go/things to do for a fun date. Write them here so you won't forget them!**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

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**“Why would a couple that lives and sleeps together every night need dates and rituals? Precisely because they live and sleep together.” — Bill Doherty, Take Back Your Marriage**

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## Directions

In **The Art and Science of Love**, Dr. Gottman promotes the mantra, “Small things often.” In other words, it’s the small positive things, done often, that make a difference. Take a few minutes to think of ways to make positive connections, or deposits, into your emotional bank account. Remember the little, everyday things your partner will appreciate but may not ask for or respond to regularly. List some of those below.

### Positive Connections — Building Emotional Currency

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6. \_\_\_\_\_
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8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Don’t stop here... grab some paper and write down anything you think of — add to it when new ideas come along! Remember, little things make a difference.

## Directions

Now write some things your spouse or partner does that you appreciate. Share this information with him/her so they can add these ideas to the list of ways to create positive sentiment in your relationship. Later, you may want to use examples from this list to develop “I” Statements to let your partner know how you feel.

### Positive Connections — Little Things That Mean a Lot

1. \_\_\_\_\_
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4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

## Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Drs. Gottman, Norman Vincent Peale, Henry Grayson, and many other writers and scientists have written about the laws of physics that indicate — we are all interconnected on many levels. In other words, if we see more of what we expect to see (the proverbial self-fulfilling prophecy) and we are influenced by the thoughts and actions, we must aim for the best!

In his book, **Mindful Loving**, Dr. Grayson talks about testing this premise over 15 years ago when he tried an informal experiment with his spouse. Over a period of two weeks, without her knowledge, he alternated between having only positive thoughts about his spouse one day

while he was away at work and negative thoughts about her the next. On the positive days, he dismissed any negative thoughts and only focused on the loving and caring thoughts — thoughts of appreciation and admiration. He also focused on good times and fond memories they had together. On the alternating days, he dredged up arguments and faults and dismissed any positive sentiment.

Dr. Grayson reports that the results were dramatic. On the days he thought only positive thoughts, she greeted him lovingly at the door and they shared nice evenings together. On the other days, they either ignored each other or ended up arguing over something. When he told her about the experiment, he asked what kind of thoughts she experienced about him over that time. Without fail, she experienced the same kind of thoughts and feelings about him on alternating days that he had for her.

Expecting the best from our partners may result in getting it. Establishing a culture of “positive sentiment” by increasing the currency in the emotional bank account may greatly enhance your relationship. Giving people the benefit of the doubt by not jumping to conclusions (also known as mind reading and negative interpretation) and clarifying their intentions will benefit both of you individually and the relationship as a whole.

**Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

## **Four Hallmarks of a Great Relationship**

Research has shown that the happiest, most deeply contented couples have four things in common, though they may demonstrate them in different ways. Drs. Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg in their book, **Fighting for Your Marriage**, which is based on their marriage enrichment curriculum, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), emphasize the following “four hallmarks of a great relationship:”

### **1. Be Safe at Home**

Physical, emotional and commitment safety

### **2. Open the Doors to Intimacy**

Couple meetings, date night, positive connections and listening

### **3. Do Your Part and Be Responsible**

Use effective skills to solve problems and take ownership of your feelings and actions

### **4. Nurture Security in Your Future Together**

Sort through relationship challenges together, renew your commitment and be willing to do whatever is necessary to have a relationship that is good for both of you

**Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

# The Five Magic Hours

The Gottman Institute was surprised to find that couples whose relationships continued to be strong over time were devoting only an extra five hours a week to their marriages. This was coined “The Five Magic Hours.” These extra hours consist of small actions. When done on a regular basis, they can improve and strengthen your relationship (that’s less than one hour a day!).

- Spend a few minutes in the morning talking about your upcoming day.
- Debrief at the end of each day with a stress-reducing conversation where partners actively listen to each other review their day.
- Find some way to express admiration and appreciation to your partner every day.
- Show affection toward your partner daily (John Gottman and his spouse/partner, Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman, have a 6-second rule for kisses in their relationship — all kisses last at least six seconds).
- Spend time weekly really talking to each other. Ask questions about your partner’s hopes and dreams, plans at work or home...know each other intimately.

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**“One of the great illusions of our time is that love is self-sustaining. It is not. Love must be fed and nurtured, constantly renewed. That demands ingenuity and consideration, but first and foremost, it demands time.”— David Mace**

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**Gottman, J. & Schwartz — Gottman, J. (2001). The art and science of love: A workshop for couples. Washington: The Gottman Institute.**

## Communication and Conflict

Stephen White, a well-known author and psychologist who lives with MS, writes in one of his novels that for intimacy to occur, two things are required: vulnerability and disclosure. We talk about safety a lot in this handbook. White’s comments sum up the reason it is so important, “Without safety there is no vulnerability, and without vulnerability no risks are taken to talk about the things that scare us... hence there’s no true intimacy.”

## The Truth About Conflict

- Conflict is inevitable.
- How you manage conflict will determine the health of your relationships.
- Violence, threats and intimidation (whether verbal, emotional, sexual or physical) are never okay.
- 59% of marital conflicts can't be resolved because hidden issues are the real source of conflict.

## The Key is People Must Feel Safe

- People will not allow themselves to be vulnerable if they do not feel safe.
- They won't say what they are really thinking.
- They feel disconnected and alone.
- People may respond defensively if not feeling safe.

**Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

## Partner Practice

Make some notes here about ways you can set the tone for emotional safety; for instance, offer to listen without interrupting.

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# Common Communication Problems

Let's face it, not all blunders and bad behaviors are created equally. In his book, **Why Marriages Succeed or Fail**, Dr. Gottman identifies what he calls the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." As you might expect, these problems can mean real trouble for relationships. Dr. Gottman finds these to be the best-known predictors of divorce, but acknowledges that most couples do some or all of these from time to time. **What makes the difference for couples who succeed in their relationship has to do with their ability to reconcile the problem when it happens.** Dr. Gottman calls this a "repair attempt," meaning the offending party makes an effort to make amends, sooner rather than later. You will read more about this later.

The next few pages identify common communication problems and skills you can use if the issue applies to your relationship. You may see some terms that have not been discussed yet, but they are all defined in this handbook and several can be accessed quickly using the Table of Contents.

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**"Deep listening is miraculous for both listener and speaker. When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely interested listening, our spirits expand." — Sue Patton Thoele**

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## Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

### Criticism

**Complaining with blaming**, which may include an attack on a partner's personality or storing a list of criticisms, thus making the anger more intense. Women are more likely than men to commit this offense, possibly because women initiate 80% of the discussions in a relationship. The way a discussion begins in the first three minutes determines the outcome 96% of the time.

### Antidote

Complain instead of criticizing by sticking to the facts. Avoid the terms "always" and "never" in your conversation. Stay in the present, and do not rehash old disagreements. Focus on the actions, not the person. Use "I" statements and a softened start-up to keep it safe.

### Skills

"I" statements, prefacing or softened start-up.

## Defensiveness

Defending one's innocence, trying to avoid a verbal attack, counter-attacking and whining, denying responsibility for a problem, cross-complaining and taking the innocent victim stance.

### Antidote

Take responsibility for your part of the problem.

### Skills

"I" statements, de-escalation techniques, take responsibility.

## Contempt

This occurs when one partner acts superior or takes the moral high ground; it is often accompanied by belligerence, insults and/or put-downs. These may be expressed non-verbally, e.g., eye-rolling, smirking, etc. This increases fighting in times of disagreement or conflict and is considered the most powerful predictor of divorce.

### Antidote

Create a culture of appreciation and acceptance in your relationship. Treat your partner with the same dignity and respect you would a client or customer. Practice humility.

### Skills

"I" statements, active listening, self-soothing, de-escalation techniques, repair attempts, challenge faulty beliefs.

## Stonewalling

Withdrawing from an interaction, often due to feeling "flooded" (overwhelmed by negative feelings), negative interpretation or mind-reading. Men are reported to be the culprits of this behavior about 85% of the time. It is an attempt to flee the interaction, sometimes due to criticizing... a way of shutting down emotionally.

### Antidote

If you are feeling flooded, recognize the signs and take a time out for self-soothing but set a time to go back to the discussion when you are calm. When this occurs because you are anticipating what may come next, try to stop your racing thoughts and challenge the validity of them, as in the case of mind-reading. Often we anticipate the worst case scenario, when it may not even be true.

## **Skills**

Self-soothing, time-out, thought-stopping, challenge faulty beliefs, “I” statements, problem-solving.

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**“The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to when your words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech.” — Edwin H. Friedman**

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Adapted from: Gotman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Fireside Books.

## **Other Blocks to Communication**

The authors of PREP also identified what they call “Communication Danger Signs” and “Communication Filters” that prevent clear communication. Much like the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” there are times when even the best of relationships may slip into some of these behaviors.

Couples may need more intensive help to overcome some of these behaviors if they have become patterns. If both partners are willing and committed to change these patterns in order to save their relationship, it can be done.

Read more about the danger signs and the antidotes below.

### **Inattention**

Distracted, otherwise engaged or unable to connect due to fatigue, illness, etc.

#### **Antidote**

Wait for a break. Ask if it is a good time and if not, ask your partner to let you know when he or she is available to talk. If you are unable to pay attention, say so and let your partner know when you will be ready to talk.

## **Skills**

Softened start-up and prefacing.

### **Emotional States**

Feeling too sad, afraid, angry or insecure to share openly.

## **Antidote**

Remember that emotional safety (acceptance and approval) is necessary for people to share things that make them feel vulnerable. If you are not feeling secure enough, or are just having a bad day and feel too fragile or volatile to share, ask your partner to give you more time. If your partner is struggling with this, let her/him know that you are willing to wait and will do what you can to be accepting and non-judgmental when you talk. Be honest and accept responsibility for your feelings; they are neither right nor wrong.

## **Skills**

“I” statements and active listening.

## **Beliefs and Expectations**

Conscious or unconscious values or beliefs that cause one to expect a certain outcome.

## **Antidote**

Self-awareness is critical. Our beliefs color our perceptions and thus how we interpret everything we see and hear. Be conscious of your differences, discuss them and keep an open mind. If you know an issue is being addressed that you have strong feelings about, or one that pushes your buttons, say so. Agree to disagree when necessary and always respect your partner’s right to his or her own opinions and feelings. Give people the benefit of the doubt. When you blow it, and sometimes you will, take responsibility and attempt to correct the situation.

## **Skills**

Repair attempts, challenge faulty beliefs and self-awareness.

## **Style Differences**

Some people are naturally extroverts and others introverts, some planners and others more spontaneous, some open and others more guarded; this is normal. Styles develop based on early role models and life experiences, as well as temperament. None are right or wrong, just different.

## **Antidote**

Acceptance and respect of differences is required for emotional safety. The ability to see oneself as different, but not better or worse, takes a lifetime of practice. Discussing those differences that affect your relationship is important, if only to decide how to best handle them when they arise. Finding the middle path is most important.

## **Skills**

Problem-solving, active listening and conflict resolution.

## Self-Protection

An attempt to avoid feeling rejected or hurt. We all feel overly-sensitive at times. Some people withdraw when they feel the need to self-protect and others lash out. Either extreme may be an attempt to protect ourselves from further stimulation or the need to defend ourselves.

### Antidote

When you feel flooded it is important to recognize the physical signs and acknowledge them to your partner so she or he will understand what is happening to you. This is especially true if you are just entering a conversation and your partner has no way to know that you were overstimulated before the discussion, or during a disagreement or emotional exchange. If you are feeling afraid, tell your partner what you need to feel safe, a.k.a. prefacing (“I need you to listen without interrupting or drilling me with questions when I finish my story.”) If you are too flooded to talk, ask for a time-out and plan a time to talk later when you feel ready.

### Skills

Softened start-up, time-out, “I” statements, self-soothing.

## Escalation

This can take the form of verbal escalation (progressively negative interactions), emotional escalation (raising the intensity of the disagreement) or escalation of content (raising the stakes, or “one-upping”).

### Antidote

Prepare for stressful conversations by scheduling the time to discuss them, think of what you want to say before the discussion begins and use the mastery skills to prevent or stop escalation.

### Skills

Self-awareness, time-out, softened start-up/prefacing, repair attempts, self-soothing, “I” statements, active listening.

## Invalidation

Invalidation can appear subtle (discrediting the concerns or fears of your partner) or extreme (put-downs or walking away from the discussion). At times it is not even a conscious act, which means self-awareness is required. You may even have to tell your partner when this happens if they don’t recognize it.

## **Antidotes**

Understand the subtleties of invalidation and don't minimize the problem when it happens.

## **Skills**

"I" statements, self-awareness, complain instead of criticizing, avoid put downs, don't bring up the past.

## **Negative Interpretations**

This means hearing things more negatively than intended, believing the worst instead of the best, or seeing only what we expect to see in a negative light.

## **Antidote**

The best way to avoid this is to give your partner the benefit of the doubt. This can be difficult, especially when couples have been together for a long time and expect patterns of behavior to appear, but it prevents a multitude of problems.

## **Skills**

Active listening, positive connections, "I" statements, seek first to understand.

## **Avoidance and Withdrawal**

Refusal to acknowledge an attempt to communicate or unwillingness to respond to attempts to communicate.

## **Antidote**

Make every effort to prepare for stressful conversations and use self-soothing skills if you begin to feel flooded with emotion. If you have to call a time out to re-group, always plan to go back to the conversation within 24 hours.

## **Skills**

Self-soothing, challenge faulty beliefs, prefacing.

## **Partner Practice**

Consider each of the communication problems listed on the preceding pages. Check off any that you encounter when talking with your partner and circle the specific skills listed to help with the communication problem. Pay special attention to mastering these skills to enhance your relationship.

**Adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

# Active Listening

**Mastery Skill: Let your partner know that nothing is more important than understanding what she or he is saying. Paraphrasing and clarifying are critical to getting the message.**

According to the Center for Curriculum Technology and Education Reform a Google web search indicated that active listening has many different definitions. Among those are:

- “Active listening is a way of listening that focuses entirely on what the other person is saying and confirms understanding of both the content of the message and the emotions and feelings underlying the message to ensure that understanding is accurate.”
- "Active listening involves carefully attending to and demonstrating understanding of what another person says. A teacher can use active listening by nodding their head and then reflecting back to what the student is saying. It is a process of mirroring back what students are trying to say. No judgment or evaluation is made, but it is important for a teacher to use active listening because it confirms that the teacher is attentive and understands the student’s message.”
- “Active listeners listen to the person speaking instead of thinking about what they are going to say next. They reiterate what the person is trying to say in an effort to clarify and clear up any misunderstandings. They seek to understand the person and their needs before their own concerns are heard. Using specific emotions helps to identify how the other person feels and helps the two parties come to some kind of ‘win-win’ solution.”

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**“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.” — Anthony Robbins**

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**Hursh, T. (2004). Active Listening. Retrieved July 1, 2009**

Often we spend our time formulating a rebuttal, revisiting old arguments or interrupting to make our point instead of hearing the message the speaker is sending.

The technique that follows is especially good to use when you and your partner are stuck in your dialogue. This skill is called active listening. It implies that you are putting the needs of your partner first, by listening and rephrasing or mirroring what he or she says to ensure that you understand their point.

After you are sure that you clearly understand your partner's message, he or she will listen as you speak using the same method. Only when you both feel that you have been heard and agree that you understand the other's position do you consider moving into problem solving, which will be addressed a bit later.

The goal of active listening is:

- For each partner to feel understood by the other.
- **Not** agreement.
- **Not** to solve the problem (yet).

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**“The most important marriage skill is listening to your partner in a way that they can't possibly doubt that you love them.” — Dianne Sollee**

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**Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

## **Step One**

### **Align Your Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication**

What you say is important, but so is how you say it. Posture, tone of voice, eye contact and stance speak volumes. When people give mixed messages, there is a disconnect between what they say and how they say it. This leaves the listener confused, so ensure your verbal and non-verbal communication align.

### **Non-Verbal Communication**

#### **Eye Contact**

Maintaining eye contact when you are talking to someone is a way of conveying that you are listening; it says, “I respect you enough to pay attention to what you want to convey to me.”

#### **Body Language**

Your facial expressions and posture should be aligned with verbal content. Keep your expression neutral to portray your openness, rather than expressing a reaction to what you are hearing.

#### **Prompting**

Nodding and verbal prompts (“uh-huh”) let the speaker know you are following the dialogue and interested. This keeps the flow of the conversation moving.

A study by Albert Mehrabian conducted in 1971 found that 55% of the effectiveness of what you say when expressing empathy depends on your facial expressions and body language. 38% of the effectiveness of the message comes from how words are said, i.e. tone, pitch and speed. The actual words spoken only account for 7% of the effectiveness of the communication of empathy.

**Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent Messages*. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.**

## Step Two

### **Listen and Clarify**

Think of ordering from your favorite menu. You tell the person taking your order what you want item by item, and repeat it back to you. If they misunderstood something you said, you correct the mistake, and they usually repeat that back to you. Active listening is much the same. You listen to the speaker, then verify that you heard them correctly using something similar to the sentence stems listed below. If you misunderstood something, it will be clarified, and you have a chance to check out the accuracy of what you heard again. This is not the way you speak all the time, just when something important is being discussed.

If these sentences stems don't seem natural to you, find your own words. Once you get the hang of it, it will become more natural.

### **How to Paraphrase**

- “So, what I hear you saying is...”
- “So, from your point of view...”
- “It sounds like you...”
- “So, you mean...”
- “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You feel...”
- “So, you’re saying...”

## Step Three

### **Practice Makes Perfect. Seek First to Understand.**

- Decide who will speak first.
- Take turns speaking and listening — the speaker will say only 2–3 statements, then wait for it to be repeated back.
- The listener will paraphrase or repeat his/her understanding of what was said; the speaker will clarify if needed.
- Continue until you both feel understood.

## Partner Practice

Practice the active listening technique by taking turns sharing with your partner. Take five minutes each to discuss something neutral, with no strong emotional spark, e.g., a television show, hobby, recent accomplishment, children or childhood memory. Afterward, talk about your experience of really focusing on the message and each other.

## How to Create “I” Statements

**Mastery Skill: Speak the truth by using language that takes responsibility for your feelings and clearly states your needs without creating defensiveness in the listener.**

Using effective communication skills can improve the dynamics of your relationships, both at home and otherwise. While this will not change the fact that you and your partner are living with a chronic illness, it may help you better manage the challenges of daily life. “I” Statements are particularly effective in raising concerns and communicating praise. In the next few pages you will learn how to state appreciation and make requests using an assertive style of communication.

### Raising Concerns

- People need to know that their needs, wants and desires matter.
- Most people don’t enjoy hearing something negative about themselves.
- We need to express our concerns in a gentle, respectful and specific way.

### Praising Others

- People like to know when they have done something that makes someone they love happy.
- When people know what they did was pleasing it often increases the chances they will do it again.

### Partner Practice — Activity 1 of 3

One thing I like about my partner is \_\_\_\_\_

One concern I have is \_\_\_\_\_

Use the following model when you are struggling to get past communication blocks. It may be appropriate to take a time out first, particularly if things are getting heated. Used in conjunction with active listening, this skill can help resolve conflicts in a way that respects both partners.

Ideally, you will first listen to each other, paraphrasing or restating what your partner says in order to understand. Then you make requests regarding your concerns about this situation or behavior with “I” Statements.

**Adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products.**

## Feeling Words

**Sometimes it is hard to express exactly what you are feeling. Below you will find some helpful hints to express emotions:**

- |              |                 |                     |               |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| ■ Hurt       | ■ Excited       | ■ Agitated          | ■ Mistrust    |
| ■ Eager      | ■ Devastated    | ■ Outraged          | ■ Powerful    |
| ■ Aggravated | ■ Indignant     | ■ Concerned         | ■ Down        |
| ■ Secure     | ■ Euphoric      | ■ Helpless          | ■ Worried     |
| ■ Afraid     | ■ Hesitant      | ■ Irritated         | ■ Persuasive  |
| ■ Distressed | ■ Despondent    | ■ Taken for granted | ■ Depressed   |
| ■ Lonely     | ■ Justified     | ■ Angry             | ■ Distrust    |
| ■ Unsafe     | ■ Guilty        | ■ Slighted          | ■ Criticized  |
| ■ Ambiguous  | ■ Leery         | ■ Mad               | ■ Alienated   |
| ■ Happy      | ■ Passionate    | ■ Shorted           | ■ Embarrassed |
| ■ Isolated   | ■ Appreciated   | ■ Misunderstood     | ■ Frustrated  |
| ■ Insecure   | ■ Worried       | ■ Overwhelmed       | ■ Cared about |
| ■ Ambivalent | ■ Hopeful       | ■ Furious           | ■ Confused    |
| ■ Elated     | ■ Psyched       | ■ Left out          | ■ Irritated   |
| ■ Cornered   | ■ Unappreciated | ■ Defensive         | ■ Safe        |
| ■ Relaxed    | ■ Anxious       | ■ Powerless         | ■ Irate       |
| ■ Unsure     | ■ Hopeless      | ■ Sad               | ■ Joyful      |

### “I” Statement Format

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (Identify your feelings)  
when \_\_\_\_\_. (Describe situation/behavior)

**Example:** “I feel very loved and appreciated when you do extra chores, like feeding the cats when I am tired.”

## Partner Practice — Activity 2 of 3

### Offering Praise

Look at what you wrote that you liked about your partner. Write it here using an “I” Statement. Try to be specific so your partner will know what you like.

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### Here’s another way of saying the same thing

Adding the third part is only necessary when making a request. Use the format that seems most natural to you in any given situation.

When \_\_\_\_\_ (Describe the specific behavior/situation)  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_. (Tell how you feel or were affected)  
In the future I would like \_\_\_\_\_. (Make a request for the change you want)

**Example:** “When we get calls that our bills aren’t being paid on time I feel anxious and scared. Can we please talk about some checks and balances for managing the budget?”

The softened start-up, also known as “prefacing,” is a technique to use when you want to prepare the listener for what you have to say.

**Example:** “I want to talk to you about something that is bothering me, so I’d appreciate it if we could talk when we won’t be distracted by other things.” Or: “It’s time to talk about the budget again. Since this often results in a disagreement, could we make a pact to talk calmly without arguing or blaming each other? We can do it tomorrow if that would be a better time for you.”

## Partner Practice — Activity 3 of 3

### Making a Request

Now, look at the concern you wrote about your partner in Activity 1. Write it using an “I” Statement. Add the third statement asking for what you want. If it is a sensitive issue, try adding a softened start-up, too.

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### Partner Practice

Now, take a few minutes to tell your partner what you wrote in your “I” statement. Be gentle when making the request and/or expressing your concern.

### Remember

When you make a request the person has the right to say no. This is one reason these skills work... there is no reason to get defensive when your right to ask is respected

**Adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Jenkins, N. (2006). Prevention and relationship enhancement program. Colorado: PREP Educational Products**

## Intimacy vs. Individualism

Most people do not enter into a long-term relationship because they want to be left alone to do their own thing without regard for anyone else, though not everyone has the same idea of what it means to “be together.” We will spend a lot of time talking about ways to connect and be aware of the needs and feelings of our partners. However, there is also a need for us as individuals to grow and mature, learn to meet some of our own needs,

develop support networks outside our primary relationship, and have a good sense of who we are as individuals. Ideally, people would develop these parts of themselves before entering into a long-term, committed relationship, but often that isn't the case. Having healthy boundaries and learning good self-care is critical to having a healthy relationship.

Some people enter relationships at an early age, often never having lived independently. They may need more time and guidance to develop a separate sense of who they are outside of the relationship. Others who have developed that sense of being may need practice or ideas about how to foster more intimacy in a relationship. Striking a balance between the needs of the individuals and the couple is crucial, as is respecting each other's differences.

Healthy boundaries protect us from a multitude of ills that are too extensive to explore here. It is not good for either person if emotional dependency develops. Having a support network is very important; it is not fair or healthy to expect our partner to be our only support person. We all need our own friends, family, co-workers and social supports so that we do not end up pinning all of our hopes, needs, problems and dreams on our partner... that can be a setup for failure. However, it is also important to have healthy boundaries for relationships with friends, family, etc., too. "Emotional cheating" (see Appendix) can be very sneaky and often happens when we look to someone other than our partner to meet our primary emotional needs. This is different from getting our social needs met through platonic, healthy friendships — there is a critical difference.

Many ask about fostering more intimacy in their relationship. James Cordova, a researcher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (quoted in **Fighting for Your Marriage**), states that "the strongest sense of intimacy develops when one partner shares something he or she feels vulnerable about and the other partner responds in a positive and accepting way." When this happens, partners learn that it is safe to take risks and that sense of safety leads to more intimacy, hence the emphasis on emotional and commitment safety throughout this handbook. The bottom line — make it safe for you both to share your thoughts and feelings by offering acceptance and approval.

**Adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S. & Blumberg, S. (2001). Fighting for your marriage. California: Jossey-Bass-John Wiley & Sons.**

# Three Styles of Problem Solving

**Mastery Skill: Effective problem solving is always preceded by understanding the perspectives of both partners through listening and clarifying.**

In his book, **Why Marriages Succeed or Fail**, Dr. Gottman says, "If there is one lesson I have learned from my years of research it is that a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship." He goes on to say that many people believe that a low level of conflict is a sign of relationship health, but he believes we grow in our relationships by reconciling our differences.

The stages of problem solving usually follow a familiar pattern for those who address conflict and problems intentionally.

## The Stages of Problem Solving

1. **Listening** — Both partners use active listening to understand the other's position on the subject.
2. **Persuading** — Once both partners feel understood they attempt to influence the other's position.
3. **Negotiating (Accepting Influence)** — Both partners discuss what they need and are willing to give up to reach compromise.
4. **Compromise** — Partners agree to terms that are acceptable to both.

Dr. Gottman identifies three different styles of problem solving into which healthy relationships tend to fall.

## Three Different Styles of Problem Solving

### Validating Relationships

Compromise and calmly work out problems.

### Volatile Relationships

Arguments and all other communication are passionate.

### Conflict-Avoidant Relationships

Agree to disagree, rare confrontations.

His research emphasizes that "it is not a particular relational style, but the amount of positivity in a relationship that predicts success. He and others believe that successful relationships have more positive interactions than negative." Some couples fall into one

of the three different styles of problem solving, but other couples are a combination of two or all three types; he recommends taking what works from all of them to form your own style.

## Validating Couples

- Acknowledge partner's opinions and emotions as valid even in disagreement.
- Pick their battles carefully.
- Attempts to influence each other are goodnatured.
- Compromise often.
- Are very supportive of each other — good friends.
- May have too much sacrifice of personal development in lieu of keeping their bond strong.
- Need to balance individual vs. couple desires.

## Volatile Couples

- Have a high level of engagement during discussions.
- Are all about winning.
- Are not interested in hearing the other's point of view.
- Don't try to understand and empathize with partner.
- Jump into persuasion mode without the first step of active listening.
- Express more intense negative and positive emotions.
- Laugh and are more affectionate than most validating couples.
- Make up as passionately as arguing.
- Commonly tease playfully.
- Believe honesty is to be expressed above all.
- Risk becoming more negative than positive.
- Risk that their arguing can lead to violence.
- Risk that their teasing can lead to hurt feelings.

**Note:** The difference between volatile couples who are successful and an abusive couple is whether one partner is afraid of the other.

## Conflict-Avoidant Couples

- Usually agree to disagree.
- Avoid or minimize conflict.
- Don't attempt to persuade the other.
- Only compromise when the issue is a big deal.
- Get along by one acting more like the other.
- Have a strong bond so they overlook the disagreements and don't go back to them.
- Have less passion, but low risk to the relationship.
- Can become lonely.

## Partner Practice

What is your problem solving style? Do you have characteristics of more than one? What is your ideal style? Talk to your partner about how to achieve your preferred style.

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Adapted from: Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Fireside Books.

## How to Resolve Conflict Peacefully

**Mastery Skill: Effective resolution of conflict requires that both partners yield to the influence of the other during the negotiation stage.**

As you've read before, conflict seems to be inevitable for most of us. We must learn to resolve conflict through compromise if 59% of marital conflicts are unresolved. In the **Art & Science of Love**, Dr. Gottman compares successful conflict resolution and negotiation to the Japanese martial art, Aikido, in which one must yield to win. He likens this to accepting influence from your partner in order to be influential yourself.

### 1. Softened Start-Up

- Complain, not blame.
- Use "I" Statements.
  - » Describe behaviors or situations without judgment.
  - » Be specific about your request for change.
  - » Be polite, say "please" or "I would appreciate..."
- Express appreciation for what is good, or a time this was better.
- Stick to one request; do not bring out a list.

## 2. Seek First to Understand; Use Active Listening

## 3. Define the Minimal Core Areas That You Cannot Yield On

- Know your bottom line and stick with it.
- Be open to honoring your partner's bottom line.

## 4. Define the Areas of Greater Flexibility

- Identify things you can live with, even if not ideal.
- Look for a win-win.

## 5. Accept Influence and then Form a Win-Win

- Compromise
- Look for common ground and points of agreement.
- Identify the most important feelings about an issue.
- Try to understand the situation from your partner's position.
- Explore common goals.
- Find ways to work toward your common goals.
- Look for ways to yield, e.g., frequency, cost, timeline.

## 6. Be Prepared to Use a Repair Attempt if Things Get Negative

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**“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.”**  
— Ralph Nichols

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**Adapted from: Gottman, J. & Schwartz — Gottman, J. (2001). The art and science of love: A workshop for couples. Washington: The Gottman Institute.**

# How to Make Repairs

**Mastery Skill: Make peace and make up quickly when an argument ensues.**

In the **Art & Science of Love**, Dr. Gottman lists several statements for couples to use when they need to repair an interaction. The idea is to make this a natural process to stop a negative interaction, break negative patterns or make amends when you blow it. Like most new behaviors, it takes a while to perfect and may initially seem silly. It works... get past the unnatural feelings and learn to do it!

## To Reach Compromise, Try Saying:

- “Help me understand where you are coming from.”
- “I think that makes sense.”
- “What are our points of agreement?”
- “Let’s see if we can identify some common goals.”
- “If we agree on these goals, how will we get there from here?”
- “I never thought about it in that way.”
- “This is making sense to me now.”
- “I am starting to see this from your perspective.”
- “Let’s compromise. Would this work for you?”
- “I understand.”
- “I agree with this part of what you are saying.”

## Stop Escalation or Disagreement by Saying Something Like:

- “I need to take a break.”
- “Let’s stop this for now.”
- “I’m feeling overwhelmed so I need a break.”
- “I think we are losing focus.”
- “Maybe we can agree to disagree on this.”
- “Give me a few minutes... I will be back.”
- “Can we start over again?”
- “This is going well; let’s try again later.”
- “I would like to change the topic.”
- “I am not up for this conversation now.”

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**“Whenever you’re in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.” — William James**

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## When You Need to Calm Down, Say:

- “I need to regroup and get centered.”
- “I want to calm down now... can we finish this later?”
- “I am not in a good place right now; I need to stop for now.”
- “Can I take that back?”
- “This is not feeling safe for me.”
- “I need things to be calmer/safer before I can go on.”
- “Can we call a truce for now?”

## To Say You Are Sorry, You May Want to Say:

- "I overreacted... I am so sorry."
- "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."
- "I can see my part in this."
- "Let's try that again."
- "Let me start over, please."
- "I really blew that... can I try again?"
- "Forgive me... I didn't mean that."
- "How can I make things better?"
- "How can I make this up to you?"

## Partner Practice

Think of a situation that you would like to negotiate with your partner. Write the basic problem or conflict here. Use the worksheet on the next two pages to prepare for a discussion with your partner. Once you have completed the responses, talk to your partner about the situation and see what kind of compromise you come up with together.

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**Adapted from: Gottman, J. & Schwartz — Gottman, J. (2001). The art and science of love: A workshop for couples. Washington: The Gottman Institute.**

# Conflict Resolution Worksheet

## Preface/Softened Start-Up

**Example:** "I would like to talk to you about something. Is this a good time?"

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## “I” Statement of the Situation

**Example:** “I have been feeling overwhelmed by all the work required to keep up with chores. I appreciate your willingness to take care of the lawn, but with your new schedule at work and other priorities, it may not be reasonable to add this to your weekly schedule. Can we figure out a way to get the lawn cared for weekly that works for both of us?”

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## Inflexible Core Areas in this Situation

**Example:** The lawn needs to be mowed weekly in the summer, hedges trimmed, plants watered, etc.

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## Flexibility Related to this Situation

**Example:** Hiring someone to mow and hedge, mow every two weeks instead of weekly, one of us can water plants, etc.

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## Possible Compromises

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## De-Escalation Techniques

**Mastery Skill: Our actions and thoughts are connected. Take responsibility for your own behavior by managing your emotions.**

The truth is the only person we can control is ourselves. We don't have control over anyone else's feelings, and they don't have control over ours. While we may react to something our partner says, we have a choice about how to react. As you will see in the information below, we can change our emotional reactions by changing our thoughts. Over the next few pages you will learn some ways to do that, though be forewarned, it isn't easy to do.

### Self-Soothing

Self-soothing as a skill may seem obvious but, like so many things, is not always easy to do! This skill requires good self-awareness in order to recognize the signs of flooding (or emotional over-stimulation). The bodily signs are different for different people, but may include feeling flushed or hot, agitation, racing heart, sweating palms, rapid pulse and shallow breathing, to name a few. Some people begin to feel overwhelmed and have symptoms of anxiety or panic, while others may lash out in anger. To avoid getting to this point, self-awareness of your specific signs and symptoms is required. Once you know these, develop a repertoire of skills to calm yourself at the first sign of trouble. Again, different skills work for different people, so check them out and use what works for you.

**Note:** You may need to use self-soothing skills before you start a stressful conversation, or during an exchange that becomes stressful for you. In the latter, you may need to ask for a time out first, but also commit to a time when you will come back to finish the conversation. Some examples of self-soothing techniques are: deep breathing, meditation or prayer, stretching, writing, reading, a bubble bath, taking a walk or some other physical exercise, music, or any distractions, petting the cat or dog, singing, tensing and relaxing your muscles for at least 20 minutes, etc.

## Thought-Stopping

Thought-stopping is the act of interrupting a stream of thoughts or racing thoughts. Many professionals believe that our emotions follow our thoughts. If you are escalating, or getting yourself worked up rehashing a disagreement, it is probably related to the story going on inside your head.

Learn ways to interrupt this litany of thoughts in order to change your feelings. For example, visualize a STOP sign, then begin to take deep breaths and count each breath in and each breath out; continue this until you feel calmer, or can think of something else. If you can try to argue the point from the other person's perspective you will also interrupt your stream of consciousness.

## Tone

Changing the tone of your voice when one partner is escalating can help an argument wind down and prevent escalation into a huge fight.

## Pace

When someone is escalating, changing the pace of your voice may help him/her slow racing thoughts and become more rational.

## Posture

Your posture and body language send loud messages when you are in an argument. Try to keep your arms by your side rather than in front of you and stand in a more relaxed posture rather than feet planted, ready to fight.

## Humility

Being humble enough to let go of a position, an argument, the need to be right, or to prove a point may be one of the best tools available. Remember, in many cases you can be right or you can be happy...your choice. Ask yourself, "How important is it... will it matter in 5 years... is there more than one way to view this issue... is it worth more than my relationship or partner?"

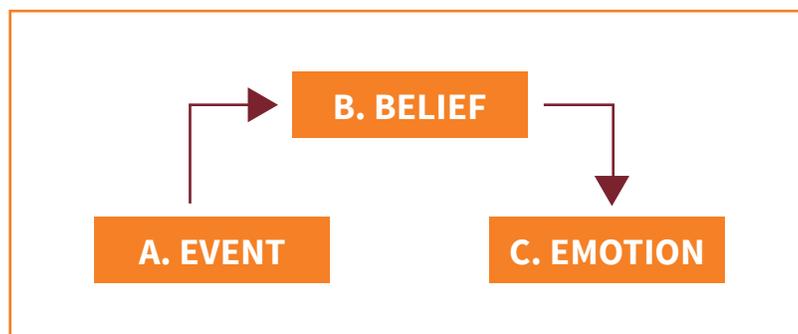
## Grace

Also known as mercy, kindness, decency and leniency—it's more important than most arguments and almost guaranteed to stop an argument.

## Challenge Faulty Beliefs

Challenging faulty beliefs is a technique that has been around for decades. Numerous psychologists and coaches use this skill to help people better manage their feelings and reactions. It can be very helpful when you recognize that you have an overreaction to something or someone, when your buttons are being pushed. To help people understand how the process works, Albert Ellis developed the ABC Theory.

According to the ABC theory, most people assume that an event, person, or topic of conversation triggers our emotional reaction. Ellis and thousands of others think it is our belief about the event, person, or topic of conversation that triggers the emotional reaction. Often, these beliefs are based on the values and perceptions we learned earlier in life. When examined, they may not even represent our current thinking, but have become habitual responses based on the outdated beliefs of others.



## Here's How it Works

### Event

You notice that you become anxious, agitated, depressed or downright mean when the subject turns to money, paying bills or budgeting.

### Beliefs

Think about your ideas about money and see what you come up with. Write the feelings that come up about each thought/belief.

- "There's never enough money, no matter how much you make."  
(fear, anxiety, insecurity)
- "My father was irresponsible with money and everybody says I'm just like him."  
(helplessness, hopelessness)
- "If your spouse/partner really loves you, he will let you stay at home while he works."  
(resentment, frustration)
- "People who are in debt have nobody else to blame." (angry, resentment)
- "Only people who are lazy have money problems." (angry, sad)

## **Challenge**

Ask yourself these questions to challenge these beliefs:

- Is this statement true?
- Are there exceptions to this?
- Can you think of a time when it was not true?
- How can you prove this to be true?
- Where did this belief come from?
- Does it represent your current thoughts and beliefs?
- If not, what are your current thoughts and beliefs?

## **Origins and Exceptions**

Write down the origins of this belief and any exceptions or alternate ways of thinking about the situation that challenge the old beliefs and the feelings associated with it.

For example, “There’s never enough money, no matter how much you make.”

My father said this a lot when I was growing up. He learned it from his father who lived through the depression. It may have seemed true to them then, but much has changed since that time. My parents did the best they could with four children and limited means, but my spouse/partner and I make more money now and we don’t have any children. Both of us have good salaries and continue to move up in our organizations. I don’t believe this statement is true for me now.

## **Alternate Belief**

“We have enough money to live a comfortable life and have no reason to think that will change in the future based on current information.”

## **Feelings**

Secure, confident, proud.

## **In Practice**

Stop old feelings of fear by replacing the outdated beliefs and stories with your new thoughts and beliefs about money. When you feel the feelings of fear, anxiety or insecurity ask yourself “What was I just thinking?” and replace the old thoughts with your new truth. Writing helps with this exercise until the new beliefs become more accessible in your conscious mind.

Complete this process for any old beliefs that may not be true or rational for you anymore. You can remind yourself of the new belief when you experience emotions that seem out of context and shift the feelings by focusing on the new belief. This takes practice and you may want to ask your loved ones for a reminder as you make the

change to this new way of thinking. It works in most cases if you can get to the root of the problem. Get professional help (if needed) until you learn the process.

## ABC Theory Worksheet

Use this activity to work through a recurring argument or hot button issue to see if your beliefs/thoughts are still valid, and find alternatives if not.

### Event/Subject

**Example:** In-laws

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### Emotional Reaction/Feelings

**Example:** Resentment, anger, guilt

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### Beliefs

**Example:** In-laws should be supportive. Partners should support each other when there is a disagreement. Everyone always has to like me.

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### Challenge

**HINT:** Words like should, always, everyone, nobody, never and other absolutes usually mean you are dealing with an irrational belief.

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## Origins and Exceptions

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## Alternate Belief/Feelings

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## Commitment Pledge

**List the Most Important Things About Your Relationship that You Want to Preserve and Protect**

The things I love about our relationship and want to protect are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Complete the following with specific actions that you would like to request of your partner to enhance your relationship**

In order to enhance our relationship, I request that you:

**More**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Less**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Exchange Worksheets with Your Partner**

Read and discuss both of your responses to the Commitment Pledge. In the space below, write the things that you are willing to do to enhance your relationship based on their requests.

**In order to enhance our relationship, I agree to protect:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

**In order to enhance our relationship, I commit to:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Based on your agreement, spend a few minutes talking with your partner about what you are willing to do to enhance your relationship and what you love and want to protect about your relationship.

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## Appendix

### Emotional Cheating

Courtesy of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

#### Introduction

Cheating is an issue that comes up in the news frequently. When political figures, athletes and other celebrities “cheat,” the public tends to be very interested in why. Popular music, television and film all often rely heavily on temptation and adultery. It is difficult to tell if these portrayals lead to an increase in cheating or if the existence of this in our society fuels the media. One thing that is for certain is that no one truly benefits from cheating in the long run.

Cheating in a relationship does not have a single definition. Most people would agree that it occurs when a person in a committed relationship or marriage has physical relations with someone other than their partner/spouse. This idea of cheating can range from kissing and heavy petting all the way to sexual intercourse.

Beyond this common definition detailed above, there is another less often recognized type of cheating. This sort of cheating may happen just as often, if not more so than the physical sort, and is called emotional cheating. This tip sheet will explore some common features of emotional cheating and offer strategies to avoid falling into it.

### **What is Emotional Cheating?**

Emotional cheating is an intimacy between two people who are in a committed relationship to other persons, and does not immediately include a physical relationship. It typically starts innocently, as a friendship that involves shared likes/dislikes and pleasant conversation, and evolves into an emotional closeness with communication about deeper issues that would usually be reserved for a partner or spouse with whom there has been an expressed commitment. Instead of reserving this communication for the committed partner, it is offered to this other person who is considered more understanding and a better person with whom to entrust this information.

If a partner is getting what they need emotionally outside of their relationship, then they are less likely to try to work on their original relationship. This is treacherous territory. In order to have a committed relationship, one must be willing to put energy into maintaining communication and intimacy with that partner.

### **How Can a Relationship be Considered Cheating When There is no Sexual Activity Taking Place?**

All human beings have a need for emotional support and communication. This leads us to seek out relationships that will satisfy these needs. What makes emotional cheating a problem is that a person gets their need to be emotionally close to someone satisfied by a person other than their partner. These emotionally unfaithful relationships often begin as strictly nonphysical; with time though, they can easily develop into romantic relationships.

### **When Can Emotional Cheating Occur?**

In relationships, emotional cheating often happens when communication has broken down between a couple and the partners feel starved for attention. This sort of cheating can be especially dangerous because, like physical cheating, it can break down trust when it is discovered.

### **How Can I Avoid Emotional Cheating?**

#### **Save Emotionally Intimate Conversations for Your Partner**

If you find yourself turning to your friend for emotional support instead of your partner or spouse, then you are probably going down an inappropriate path.

## **Set Rules and Expectations for Your Platonic Friendship**

Some people believe that men and women cannot have friendships. It is possible for a man and woman to be friends, however, those in committed relationships should be careful to have limits set with which your partner or spouse is comfortable.

## **Be Careful of Online Relationships and Office Relationships**

Online relationships are not innocent simply because you are not face to face. Office relationships are not automatically protected since you are in a work situation. Your interactions should have strict boundaries and intimate conversations should be avoided.

## **Do Not Discuss Intimate Details**

This only opens the door for discussions that could be harmful. In relationships, emotional cheating often happens when communication has broken down between a couple and the partners feel starved for attention.

## **What if My Extramarital Relationship is Becoming Too Close?**

Immediately change your patterns. Do not wait. Create new limits and boundaries, or stop communicating with this person altogether. Be honest and tactful by giving the other person your reasoning (if you have let it get this far you should be able to communicate this). Then, take some time for self reflection: what did you get from this person that you did not get from your partner? Be specific. Was it empathy? Attention? Fun? Once this is identified, it's time to start working on your committed relationship; this will involve discussing your unmet needs with your partner. Together, you may want to attend a relationship education class.

## **Conclusion**

Emotional cheating is intimacy between two people that doesn't involve a physical relationship at first. This type of infidelity can be just as damaging to a committed relationship as a physical affair. If you are going to have friendships with members of the opposite sex, make sure you establish clear boundaries that both you and your partner or spouse are comfortable with. Having intimate conversations with someone other than your partner or spouse should be avoided at all costs. Although it may be difficult in the moment, always turn to your partner, instead of your friend, for emotional closeness.

# What is a healthy relationship anyway?

John Gottman, PhD., has administered research studies with couples since 1973 and has determined what behaviors most often predict success or failure in a relationship. Here are some tips that are recommended from the Gottman Institute website ([gottman.com](http://gottman.com)):

## Edit Yourself

Couples who avoid saying every critical thought when discussing touchy topics are consistently the happiest.

## Soften Your “Start-Up”

Arguments first “start up” because a spouse sometimes escalates the conflict from the get-go by making a critical or contemptuous remark in a confrontational tone. Bring up problems gently and without blame.

## Accept Influence

A marriage succeeds to the extent that the spouse/partner can accept influence from his spouse/partner. A spouse/partner’s ability to be influenced by his spouse’s/partner’s (rather than vice-versa) is crucial because research shows women are already well practiced at accepting influence from men, and a true partnership only occurs when a spouse/partner can do so as well.

## Have High Standards

Happy couples have high standards for each other even as newlyweds. The most successful couples are those who, even as newlyweds, refuse to accept hurtful behavior from one another. The lower the level of tolerance for bad behavior in the beginning of a relationship, the happier the couple is down the road.

## Learn to Repair and Exit the Argument

Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control.

## Focus on the Bright Side

In a happy marriage, while discussing problems, couples make at least five times as many positive statements to and about each other, and their relationship, as negative ones. A good marriage must have a rich climate of positivity.

# A Word About Safety and Abuse

**Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.**

Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions, or threats of actions, that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, neglect or wound someone. If you are afraid of your partner, or your basic needs are being withheld, get help!

Domestic violence can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion or gender. It can happen to couples who are married, living together or dating. Domestic violence affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels.

Call the National MS Society to ask for assistance (1-800-344-4867). If there is imminent danger, call 9-1-1. Be aware that your danger level may increase if you try to leave, so have a safety and support plan in place, unless you are in a life-threatening situation and leaving is the only safe option.

## **National Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

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The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information on multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience and expert opinion, but do not represent therapeutic recommendations or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult a qualified physician.

For more information on available programs, services and support, please contact an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867 or visit [nationalMSSociety.org](http://nationalMSSociety.org).

The National MS Society is a collective of passionate individuals who want to do something about MS now — to move together toward a world free of multiple sclerosis.

The National MS Society mobilizes people and resources so that everyone affected by multiple sclerosis can live their best lives as we stop MS in its tracks, restore what has been lost and end MS forever. Through our comprehensive nationwide network of services, the Society connects those affected by MS to the communities, information and resources they need. The Society is the largest private funder of MS research in the world, investing millions of dollars into ongoing and new research projects each year to move us closer to a world free of MS.



**National  
Multiple Sclerosis  
Society**

**[nationalMSSociety.org](http://nationalMSSociety.org)  
1-800-344-4867**