

IMPACTFUL CONVERSATIONS

PRACTICAL COMMUNICATION & CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR COUPLES

PROVEN STRATEGIES
TO STOP THE BATTLES
& FIND HARMONY WITH YOUR SPOUSE

By [OnlineMarriageCounselors.com](https://www.OnlineMarriageCounselors.com)



Introduction

Where do the two of you fall on the marital spectrum? Are you a young couple headed towards your wedding date looking to participate in pre-marriage counseling? Perhaps you're already married and you are simply being intentional about the maintenance of your relationship. Are you a couple in distress and on the verge of separation and divorce? Maybe you're simply trying to navigate a change of season in your lives, such as having children or becoming empty nesters, and need some guidance in negotiating the changes. No matter where you and your significant other may be on the course of your life and relationship, [Online Marriage Counselors](#) can meet you there and bring some clarity to the most important aspect of your lives together – healthy communication with the one you love the most.

Most if not all of us have become very comfortable in our communication patterns at this point in our lives. After all, we've been communicating since we came into this world. As an infant we were fed, changed, or comforted because we signaled our need(s) by crying. Once we began to acquire language recognition skills, we used them primarily towards the same end. At this point we simply take for granted that we are good at it and that it doesn't require any higher level of thought. Once we have an idea or feeling that we are comfortable sharing we do just that. Not hard at all, right? But healthy communication is not a linear pursuit. It requires more than just your output.

Listening is a much more complex and nuanced activity than we think and it doesn't necessarily come naturally to us. From the time of our birth we are conditioned to communicate for our own gain. As a result, we developed the attitude that speaking holds more value than listening and that the primary reason we should listen is to formulate what we should be saying in order to get what we want like we did as a crying baby seeking to have our needs fulfilled. Even our early schooling teaches us to listen for our own benefit – repeat what you were taught and receive a good grade. Consequently, we typically and habitually listen in order to respond. But listening to respond is not as beneficial or effective as listening to understand, particularly in our most important relationships.

Whether you are already married or you are well on your way to getting married, you may have noticed that there is a direct and unbreakable link between the quality of your communication and the quality of your life. The bible tells us that the power of life and death exist in our words and studies in human physiology have indicated that the entire human body is influenced by dialogue. Our relationships and our very lives succeed or fail from moment to moment, one conversation at a time. While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of your life or marriage, any single conversation has the potential to create a lasting impact.

Your relationships are essentially the sum total of the conversations you've had within them. This workbook asks you to consider which conversations have created both the trouble and beauty of your relationship. It offers a different perspective on how you give and receive information in ways that you have probably taken for granted in the past. Furthermore, this workbook can guide you to boldly come together and confront the issues and dynamics of your relationship that can only be dealt with intentionally through impactful conversations.

But remember, this is merely a tool. It will only be as useful as you allow it to be based on your sincerity and earnest effort. You get out what you put in. So put your best self in the process!

We pray that each of you embrace this opportunity to grow as a person and as a couple!

DISCLAIMER

While every effort has been and will be made to accurately represent some of the many ways in which you can reinvent your relationship and improve your quality of life, there is no guarantee that you will become a happier individual or a healthier couple as a result of your viewing, reading, and using the materials in this workbook. This information is useful for the maintenance of any marital relationship. It can work in conjunction with or as a bridge to clinical therapy for couples who are in crisis. We have graduate level degrees, certifications, and licensure that qualify us to provide marriage counseling services. However, this workbook offers psychoeducation, NOT psychotherapy, and should not be considered a substitute for working directly with a competent marriage counselor. Any person or product that tells you otherwise is lying. Even though this information can be life altering and eye opening, there is never any guarantee. Just like life in general, really. The improvement of your relationship with your spouse is entirely dependent on the person/couple utilizing the information, strategies, tools, and resources herein.

note:

The following page of this workbook is an agreement form for the two of you to fill out. Return to it, if need be, in moments of tension or when you think you might want to give up on trying this. We included it as a reminder of the commitment you made when you said your wedding vows or accepted a marriage proposal, as well as all of the other little commitments you have made to each other during your time together. Do not take this or any of them lightly.



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Ground Rules

1. **Search for the good** – Your spouse is still the wonderful person you agreed to enter into marriage with. Seek to find the traits that attracted you to them and solidified your feelings for them in the beginning. Sometimes it is only your perspective on those things that has changed when your circumstances aren't at their peak.

2. **Enter with a desire to offer forgiveness** – If like me you are a Christian, then you know the value of forgiveness. It is immeasurable. It is also your obligation to give it as often as possible.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”.
- Ephesians 4:32

If you are not a Christian, that value of forgiveness still applies.

3. **Avoid giving analysis and advice** – Do not attempt to analyze or interpret the motives of your spouse, and don't offer unsolicited advice to them. If you are not asked specifically for advice, you should only share from your perspective of your spouse and your circumstances without assuming that they are the entirety of the facts of the matter.

4. **Equality** – The two of you are on equal and level ground. None of us are superior to our spouse in terms of importance regardless of our training, expertise, experience, or talents.

5. **Share your feelings and receive their feelings** – We often find it hard to understand how our spouse can feel the things that they feel or say the things that they say in response to us. They find it hard to understand that of you as well and you both have a right to expect some empathy from the other. It may not be easy for either of you, so help each other.

6. **Don't expect to fix it all at once** – You likely didn't get to place where your marital issues exist in an instant. Use this workbook as a guide that you can go back to over and over again and seek to improve your communication and the quality of your marriage one conversation at a time.

Apply these rules to your time spent on these activities and exercises, then try to be intentional about carrying them forward in your day to day interactions with one another.

Session One: Communication

Types of Couple Communication

We are going to focus on three types of couple communication that make up the bulk of daily conversation in most marriages.

- Information Transfer
- Bids for connection
- Calling for change

1. Information transfer:

This is the “safest” kind of communication, so troubled couples try to keep most of their communication in this realm. It is necessary for the activities of daily life, but it has a very narrow bandwidth for communicating emotional connection. In highly stressed couples, the communication atmosphere becomes so toxic that they attempt to get all interactions into this realm, because the other forms of communication have greater opportunity for misunderstanding. However, the result is often increased incongruity between message and tone that contributes to a negative spiral in couple communication.

Write down a few sentences that are examples of information transfer.

- Remember, this is just the type of communication that deals with logistics and daily routine-type of issues (ex. "Dinner is ready", "The trash needs to be taken out", "We're out of milk")

Now talk with each other about how you are typically feeling when you are using this form of communication. Keep in mind that this is a very normal way of speaking, but becomes more habitual when and person or couple is stressed, no matter where the stress may be originating.

2. Bids for Connection:

These are tiny, mundane bits of communications that make up the vast majority of your emotional communication as a couple. This occurs when a partner shares or communicates something personal and important to them and the other partner responds in an encouraging way. It may also be done in the form of a question. The initial “bid” functions as an invitation to connect, and the response is important. Most of them can be nonverbal, but we’ll focus on the verbal for exploration purposes. It is important to do this well because of the sheer volume of communication that occurs here. Keep in mind that this is a safe and simple way for us to affirm our relationship with our partner and in real life, we don’t necessarily introduce them with phrases like “I am trying to connect with you right now”. Our responses to these connection attempts usually falls into one of these three areas:

- **Turning against:** *which is becoming defensive or combative*
- **Turning Away:** *avoiding our spouse or ignoring the attempt to connect*
- **Turning towards:** *which is intentionally opening ourselves up to communicate and connect in response to the bid (Obviously, this is how we hope to be able to respond most or all of the time)*

Consider the example(s) below and come up with a sample response one might give in each of the three areas. Then, on the subsequent pages, come up with examples of a couple different bids for connection that one or both of you might use day to day and the sample responses. As you come up with these examples, be sure to speak with each other about times when you may have responded to one another in each of the three areas and talk about how each of you can do it better moving forward.

“I had a bad day!”

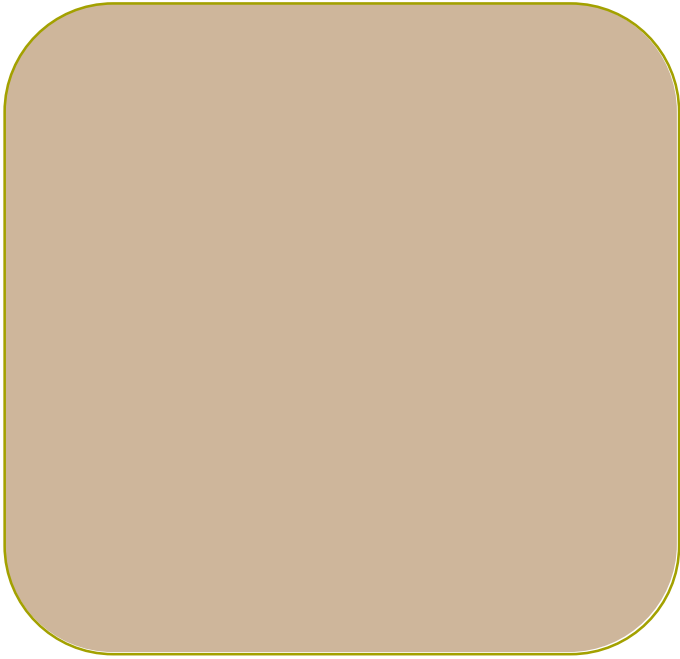
OR

“How was your day?”

Turning against:

Turning away:

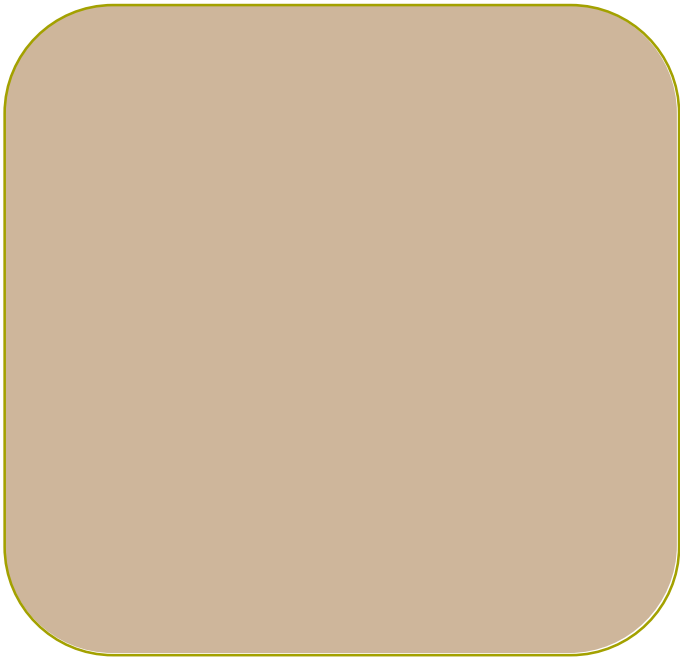
Turning towards:



Turning against:

Turning away:

Turning towards:

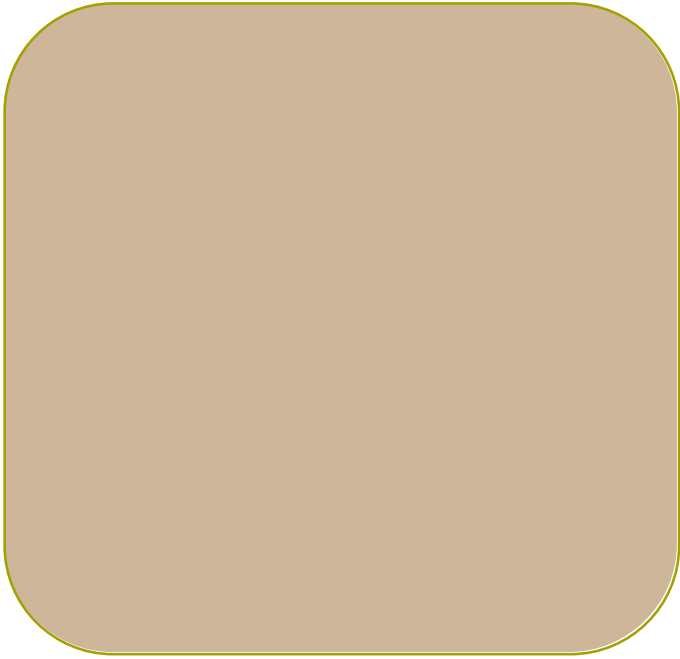


Turning against:

Turning away:

Turning towards:

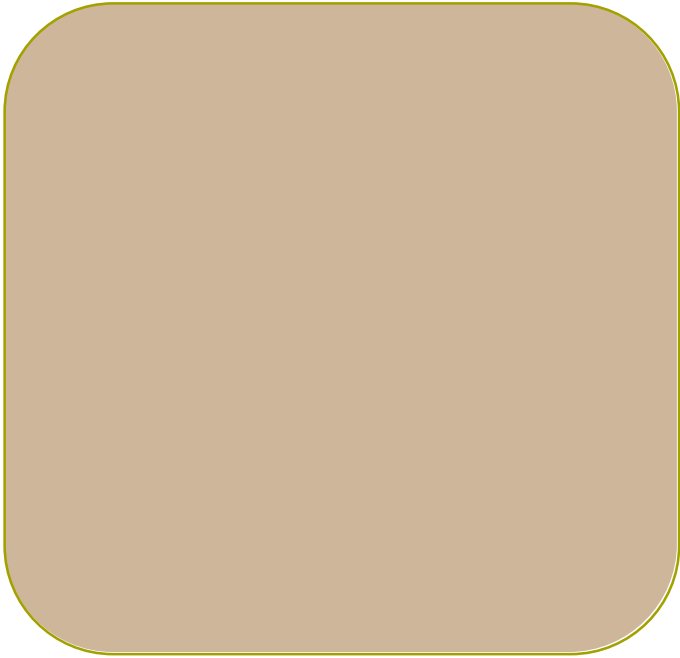




Turning against:

Turning away:

Turning towards:



Turning against:

Turning away:

Turning towards:



3. Calling for change:

This is the specific type of communication where one partner is calling for specific changes in the relational dynamic. Two skills are vital for this type of communication to be a positive experience for both partners; **assertiveness and active listening**.

Assertiveness is the ability to ask for what you want and need; it's not aggressiveness. Assertive people take responsibility for their messages by using "I" statements. They avoid statements beginning with "you." In making constructive requests, they are positive and respectful in their communication. They use polite phrases such as "please" and "thank you".

FYI – In my experience with teaching these techniques, I have found that this is hard to master in a short period of time. Most couples struggle with avoiding "you" statements and often turn "I" statements into veiled "you" statements. For example:

- "I think that you need to change the way you go about. . ." - *Oops. Try again!*
- "I believe that you are not intentionally doing this, but. . ." - *Um, not quite.*
- "I wish you were able to see this from my perspective". - *Certainly not!*

THESE AREN'T GOOD! 

Seek to make any "you" statements as positive and complimentary as you can if you can't find a way to avoid them all together. Moreover, find the positive in the things you don't always like about your spouse. Such as:

"*I like that we are always so in sync mentally*", when what you want is for them to stop finishing your sentences. This simultaneously creates appreciation within you while softening the request to stop finishing your sentences.

"*You are very attentive to my needs and always have my back*", when you think your spouse checks up on you too much and believes you can't handle or remember the important things that need to be done around the house. Again, you are reminding yourself of the positive(s) and letting your feelings be known with less chance of hurting your partner.

WARNING: This can be tricky for individuals who have sarcastic tendencies. Please check your sarcasm at

the door! 

A good example of an effective “I” statement would be “I need to feel more comfortable sharing my feelings. Please help me to do that”. OR “Thank you for all that do around the house. I’m hoping we can complete household chores even more efficiently as a team”.

Active listening involves listening intently without interruption and then restating what was heard. The active listening process lets the sender know whether or not the message sent was clearly heard. Keep in mind, active listening means LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND. Our normal listening habits often lead us into listening with an intent to respond. Seek first to understand, then to illustrate your understanding, and don’t offer a response until you have adequately shown your understanding.

This one is hard for most of us as well. Don’t feel bad if you aren’t good at it right away and don’t make your spouse feel bad if you are better at it than they are. Remember that these are new skills and they will require some practice. Be glad that you have gained some insight into what you may have been doing that kept you from communicating as effectively as you could in the past.

Now, one of you practice calling for change from your spouse using the “Assertiveness” and Vital Communication skills outlined below while the other practices “Active Listening. Then switch and try the other way around so you each get a couple of chances to be the speaker and the listener.

Vital Communication Skills

1. Look for the good in your partner and give him/her a compliment
2. Praise your partner as much as possible
3. Take time to listen to each other
4. Listen to understand
5. Use active listening, which involves summarizing your partner’s comments before you share your reactions or feelings
6. Be assertive. Share your feelings by using “I” statements. Own your words.
7. When issues arise, avoid blaming each other. Seek solutions together.
8. If problems persist, use the “Ten Steps to Resolving Couples Conflict” outline found on page 13
9. If problems still continue or escalate, then please seek counselling before they become too serious. Doing so will make it easier to find solutions.
10. Give your relationship the same priority and attention you gave it when you first started

Calling for change exercise

I would like my partner to...

1.

2.

3.

Session Two: Conflict Resolution

**Conflict is inevitable.
Combat is optional.**

- *Max Lucado*

This quote from author Max Lucado reminds us that we will always have ideas and circumstances that differ from those of our spouse and may cause friction (conflict), but that we don't always need to deal with that friction by fighting or arguing with one another (combat). However, there is an additional point that we think must be made to get to the heart of what we believe Lucado was trying to convey. Yes, conflict is inevitable and combat is certainly

optional. But it is also important to note that **confrontation is mandatory**. When we don't confront the issues or differences that exist within our relationships, then the conflicts can turn into combat quite easily.

It should be noted that confrontation is merely facing and dealing with a circumstance or problem and is not synonymous with combat, as many of us have been erroneously led to believe. One of the contributing factors to our misunderstanding of confrontation is the focus we put on our partner in these moments.

FOCUSING

FOCUSING

1. Understand that your spouse is your partner and that any issue that may manifest itself within their words or actions does not originate there and is not them. So try not to take it personally.
2. Figure out where the problem comes from AND what YOU contribute to it. Be as open minded as you can be about the possibilities.
3. Work as a team to deal with it. Lean on the strengths of one or both partners when and where it makes sense to do so. Sometimes teams need one player to step up and carry the load. That can be a different player each time, depending on the opponent. Other times it is a total team effort.

The key to resolving conflict is first shifting your focus away from your partner. This is easily achieved when we employ the 3 "P"s of conflict resolution.

The 3 "P"s of Conflict Resolution

PROBLEM: Separate the problem from the person

POSITION: Properly position the problem

PURSUE: Seek solutions together

Ten Steps to Resolving Couples Conflict

This exercise may feel awkward at first because it is not how most of us go about dealing with conflict in our homes. However, this systematic approach to conflict resolution will give us the foundation for working on our problems as a team and help us maintain our focus on the real issues(s) and not on our spouse as an issue. Is this business like? Yes, it is. Consider this time to be a family board meeting, if you will. Don't get discouraged if it doesn't all come together on this first go 'round. Your problems didn't necessarily manifest themselves in an instant. They will have to be solved one conversation at a time. You, your spouse, and your marriage are worth the effort.

The 10 steps are as follows:

1. *Set a time and a place for discussion*
2. *Define the problem or the issue of disagreement*
3. *Determine how each of you contributes to the problem*
4. *List past unsuccessful attempts to resolve the issue*
5. *Brainstorm. List all possible solutions*
6. *Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions*
7. *Agree on one step to try*
8. *Agree on how each individual will work towards the solution*
9. *Set up another meeting. Report your progress and evaluate*
10. *Find ways to reward each other as you contribute to the solution(s)*

The following pages are an outline of the above steps with which you can take notes, move through the steps, track your results, and successfully navigate the entire process without losing your way. You can make yourself several copies of this entire workbook, but this in particular is a section that you will likely want to come back to and reuse.

Conflict Resolution Worksheet

Set a time and a place for discussion, allowing at least thirty minutes.

Meeting Place: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Define the problem or the issue of disagreement. List the specific issue below:

How do you each contribute to the problem? Speaking assertively (using “I” rather than “you” statements), work together to list the things you each do which seem to hinder the solution.

List past (unsuccessful) attempts to resolve the issue.

Brainstorm – pool your ideas to try to attain five possible solutions to the problem. Don't judge or criticize any of the suggestions at this point.

Agree on how each individual will work toward the solution.

Set up another meeting. Discuss your progress.

Meeting Place: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Pay attention to each other as the week passes. If you notice your partner making progress or a positive contribution to the solution, then praise his/her effort.

NOTES:
