

4 Reasons "Communication Skills" Won't Save Your Relationship

One of the most common voice mails I get from couples requesting therapy is: "we need someone to help us with our communication." As an MFT practicing Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), I am clear that communication skills are almost positively NOT what you need.

Communication is something that you probably do quite well. Think back to the times when you and your partner were closely connected and emotionally safe. You communicated with each other just fine, right?

So no, it's not that you have lost your ability to communicate. It's simpler than that, and also more complicated. It's that somewhere along the line, the two of you scared the hell out of each other — weren't there for each other in key moments. As a result, you lost your ability to be emotionally attuned.

It may sound weird, but learning the steps to communicate better is quite possibly the wrong way to go.

Why do I say this? Because learning communication skills is a behavioral intervention, and a cognitive process. **It's something that you think about, practice, and "DO."** But if you really want to experience the high in your relationship, the safety, the bonding, the vulnerability, **you need to learn something much more powerful than "thinking" or "doing."** EFT therapists know that you need to learn to "reach" for your partner, and to be "emotionally accessible" when your partner reaches for YOU.

1. **Say goodbye to the "I" statement.** The "I" statement is something taught to clients by many a therapist. It's a way of turning this: "Look at the clock! Where have you been?" Into this: "I feel sad when you come home late."

In theory, starting your sentences with "I" helps to tone down an otherwise critical accusation, and allows your partner to respond

more empathically. In reality though, the revised sentence still gets interpreted by your partner as criticism. Just because you start with the word "I", doesn't change the fact that you're unhappy with your partner, and an unhappy YOU causes panic in your partner.

Besides that important fact, let's face it, how many people can use "I" statements in the face of high emotion, fear, anxiety, and loneliness?

This particular communication skill is very popular, well-intentioned, and may sometimes divert an argument....but it's not going to save a troubled relationship.

2. Active listening - another well-intentioned communication skill that falls short when implemented on its own.

Partner A: You were downstairs watching football and having a great time, while I was up in bed, sick and miserable.

Partner B: So what I think I hear you saying is "when you were sick, I was just downstairs, doing my own thing."

Well, really, that's an interesting skill to learn...it validates your partner and says "I heard you." But where do you go from there? Mirroring/Reflecting your partner is very important, but it's most effective when it is combined with an understanding of attachment needs.

In Emotionally Focused Therapy, partner B might instead reach out with a hand on his partner's knee, make eye contact, and softly reflect:

Partner B: Ugh, it's that negative loop thing that Linda keeps talking about in our therapy sessions, right? You started telling yourself that you don't really matter to me - that I care more about the game than you?

Partner A: Exactly. I'm laying there sick, and hoping and hoping that you'll come and care for me, and you don't. That's why I shut down and haven't talked to you all day.

Partner B: Right, I know. And so you gave me the silent treatment because you knew that if you came to me and told me how upset you were, I would feel criticized and start an argument, and tell you that I can never get it right for you. And stuff like that, right?

Partner A: That IS the cycle thing again! Around and around we go.

Ah, now you're getting somewhere. You're recognizing your partner's need for attachment (will you be there to take care of me when I'm sick?). Your emotional accessibility and your understanding of your partner's need for safety ("you tell yourself that you don't really matter to me") is much more clear. Your own attachment need is in there too! (You want your spouse's approval and so you sometimes hear "needs" as "criticisms" and react with defensiveness.) Much more useful than simple attentive listening.

3. Scheduling Talk Time — "Communication Skills" Technique Gone Wrong

Has your therapist suggested that you find a weekly block of time for talking? Ugh, what happens for you when you think about blocking out 2 to 3 hours to "talk about us." Do you cringe? Do you reach for some ice cream? Do you hide under the pillow? Of course you do! No one ever says "let's talk about us" when they want to spend 2 hours talking about how great of a partner you are. There's always bad news waiting right around the corner when someone says "we need to talk."

As an Emotionally Focused Therapist, I'm more likely to help my clients recognize that they DON'T NEED TO schedule hours,

only "moments." You don't need to hire babysitters, or spend your whole evening processing disagreements. Just find "moments." What is a "moment?" The moment that you say "I know we had a tough morning. I don't know how to fix it right now, but I know that your tears mattered to me." The moment that you call to say "I'm missing you." The moment that you make eye contact and say "are you doing okay?" The moment that you go behind closed doors with your partner for 60 seconds of reconnection before starting your evening as a family. The moment that you recognize your partner's stress and place a comforting arm while saying "we'll figure this out together...I've got your back." Finding moments creates vulnerability and connection.

How many moments did you consciously create today?

4. Therapists Who Say, "Don't Bring Up the Past," as a communication technique?

Okay, this one is REALLY the worst of them all. Suggesting that couples not bring up the past is intended to help them stay in the present, and move toward the future. It's to help them circumvent awful rehashing of old arguments. A reasonable proposal, but one fraught with problems.

In the past is where many couples have experienced hurt and pain. In the past is where your partner may have needed you and you weren't there. The past is where your brain registered something such as "this is dangerous....I'm not worthy...no one is there for me...I can't trust my partner...I'm all alone."

SO YES, BRING UP THE PAST. Then spend time laying down some new neural pathways. With a good Emotionally Focused Therapist, you can safely go back into the past with your partner there to hold your hand. He/she can let you know that finally, here and now, your pain, as it existed back then, is registering, that it matters, that it's having impact, just as you always hoped it could. The way to bury the past is to share it together in an

intimate and vulnerable way with the person closest to you in your life. When you've truly accomplished that, the past finally does become the past. Not trying to imply that this is easy, or a quick 50-minute fix, but it's a process well worth your time when you consider the payoff at the end — a lifelong intimate partnership, filled with connected moments.

For more about Emotionally Focused Therapy, listen to Sue Johnson talk about [How to Love Intentionally in the Age of Instant Gratification](#) or read the book [Hold Me Tight](#).