**Communication Tips**

1. **Use “I” messages instead of “You” messages.** “You” messages sound blaming and accusing. With an “I” message, you can convey the same message without sounding blaming. For example:

“You” message: “You left the dishes in the sink again.”  
“I” message: “When dirty dishes get left in the sink, I feel taken advantage of.”

1. **Communicate the entire message.** According to McKay et al. in their book Couple Skills (see Suggested Reading), complete messages include four components:
2. Observations: neutral statements of fact
3. Thoughts: your own opinions and beliefs
4. Feelings: descriptions of your emotions
5. Needs: a statement of what you need or want from the other person

Example: “The weekend is coming up. I hope we can go to the movies together. I would like to spend some time with you.”

An incomplete message leaves out one or more of these components. It might sound like this: “I hope we can go to the movies this weekend.” There isn’t really anything wrong with this statement, but the first one is more complete and will more likely result in the speaker getting what he or she wants.

1. **Use specific and objective language.** When you have a complaint, be specific. For example, “I’m upset that you left the food out on the table” is clearer than saying, “Thanks for the mess you left me.” The first statement is less likely to produce defensiveness and leaves little room for misunderstanding.
2. **Focus on the problem, not the person.** Consider how different these two statements sound:

“You are such a complete slob.”

“I wish you would take your stuff upstairs.”

Attacking someone’s personality or character - rather than a specific behavior - is different from simply expressing a complaint. A complaint focuses on a specific action. Criticism is more blaming and more global. It sounds like this: “You always screw the budget up. Can’t you do anything right?”

Behavior like this is damaging to a relationship because:

* Criticism is destructive rather than constructive.
* It involves blame.
* Criticisms are global and tend to be generalizations (you always, you never, etc.).
* Criticisms attack the other person personally.
* It feels overwhelming to be on the receiving end.

1. **Stop bringing up ancient history.** It’s more constructive to focus on the issue at hand, not bring up past hurts. When you are upset with your partner and add past issues to the discussion, it can only escalate the conflict. It feels unfair and can never be productive. If you still have feelings about past issues, it is important to resolve them and move on, not use them as weapons every time you have a disagreement with your partner.
2. **Pay attention to your emotions and keep from becoming overwhelmed.** If you are calm, you are less likely to say things you’ll later regret, things that could be destructive to your relationship. You will be less likely to become defensive and shut your partner out. Examples of ways to calm yourself and keep from getting carried away with emotion include the following:

Pay attention to your physical responses. Is your heart racing? Are you breathing faster? If you are, take a time-out.

Leave the room. Go for a drive. Do something relaxing. Listen to music or do relaxation exercises.

Make a conscious effort to calm yourself down. Say things to yourself like:

“I’m very upset right now, but it’ll be okay.”  
“We can work this out. We’re partners.”

1. **Confront and explore negative feelings.** If you have bad feelings about your partner, take steps to explore them, before they grow into feelings of contempt, and creep into your interactions and conversations with your spouse.
2. **Don’t be defensive.** It is understandable to react defensively when you are in a conflict situation, but it can be dangerous to a relationship. Defensiveness tends to escalate the conflict and does nothing to resolve it. Some examples of defensive behavior include:

Denying responsibility (I did not!)

Making excuses (I couldn’t help it; traffic was awful)

Ignoring what your partner says and throwing a complaint back (Yeah, well, what about the mess you left yesterday?)

Saying Yes, but…

Whining

Rolling your eyes or making a face

1. **Don’t shut down.** In Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last (see Suggested Reading), author John Gottman describes the dangers of shutting out the other person. He calls this behavior stonewalling and says that it means refusing to communicate, storming out of the room, or any kind of withdrawing. When a person is stonewalling, communication is impossible because he or she is refusing to participate. When it becomes a regular pattern of communication, stonewalling is very damaging to a relationship.
2. **It’s Not Safe to Assume**. You might think that because a person knows you, they should know what you are thinking or feeling. Making assumptions is dangerous in any type of communication. It’s up to you to tell the listener what you feel, or how you observe a situation. What may be obvious to you may not be obvious to the listener. Communicate in specifics, using examples of situations if necessary. Give your listener a frame of reference for what you describe. Don’t forget to begin the discussion gently and speak for yourself using “I” statements as described above, while keeping the issues to the point and as simple.
3. **Stop, Pause, Listen**. After you have done your best to follow the speaker rules to get your message across be sure to let the listener paraphrase or summarize what you have said. The only way to know that your listener accurately received your message is to pause and give the listener a chance to respond back to you. This response should not include their opinion about what you’ve said. They should simply re-state, in their own words, what you just shared. It’s not uncommon to learn that what we think we said, was actually heard much differently by the listener. Having the listener repeat what you’ve shared, gives you a chance to know whether your message came across. You can add corrections or clarifications [using the rules] if the listener describes something different than what you intended to communicate.
4. **Define Yourself, Not Your Spouse.** This rule is about being the expert of your own world, not your spouse’s world. Use words that describe how you feel, and what you want and need, not what your partner feels, wants, or believes.

It may seem easier to analyze your partner than to analyze yourself, but interpreting your partner’s thoughts, feelings and motives will distract you from identifying your own underlying issues, and will likely invite defensiveness from your spouse.

More importantly, telling your spouse what he or she thinks, believes or wants is controlling and presumptuous. It is saying that you know your spouse’s inner world better than your spouse does.

Instead, work on identifying your own unmet needs, feelings, and ways of thinking and describe these needs and feelings to your spouse.

1. **Pick the right time**. While there is no perfect time to raise a difficult issue, try to pick a time when you and your partner are free of other distractions. This time should be when both you and your partner can approach it positively and give your full attention. As the speaker, you can initiate the discussion by gauging what the most appropriate time may be or simply asking your partner when a good time to discuss an important issue is. If your partner approaches you at a bad time, tell them when you would be willing to discuss the issue, and then discuss it at that time.
2. **Acknowledge your common ground and shared concerns, so that you can pinpoint where you disagree or diverge.** You might disagree on how to solve a problem, but you might agree that the problem itself is problematic. You might disagree on when to discuss an issue, but you might both agree that it needs to be addressed somehow and sometime. You might disagree on how to discipline your children, but you know that you both want them to be healthy and happy, and to do well in school. You might disagree with your spouse’s opinion or behavior, but you can at least relate to their past or present feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, loss, betrayal, or guilt. Start with where you agree or are in sync when making sense of a difficult situation or dilemma.

**Suggested Reading**

Chapman, Gary D. *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate.*

Gottman, John, Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last.

Johnson, Sue. *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love.*

McGraw, Phillip C. *Relationship Rescue.*

McKay, Matthew, Fanning, Patrick, and Paleg, Kim, Couple Skills: Making Your Relationship Work.