



Going Deeper with Couples' Communication Problems: 5 Steps to Bring Strength and Clarity to your Work

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Couples Therapists Beware

Couples' communication problems are **almost never** what the couple thinks they are. Let's explore what that means for a moment and then proceed to discover 5 steps to getting therapy off to a strong start. At the end you'll find a handout you can copy and use with your couples when they're exploring their challenges in your sessions.

The most common presenting problem in couple's therapy is communication. Partners say the problem is communication. They believe and hope you will give them the tools to create better communication between them.

However, there are often more complex issues hiding behind communication problems. When you know how to look for these issues, you will often find denied accountability, regression, or defensive self-protective coping.

Many therapists begin teaching the communication tools their clients requested. Soon they discover they are stuck. They've gone down a blind alley, and therapy stalls.

Communication problems are about much more than behavioral tools.

Good communication and the rewards of good communication **take greater emotional development from each partner**. You know it is deeper work. You will need to be able to think developmentally and intervene incisively to help your clients see the work ahead.

So, how do you help your clients understand what will be required of them and that it is not just up to you to teach them skills?

Here are 5 steps to help you get started with strength and clarity.

– Ellyn Bader, Ph.D.



Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson

are founders of The Couples Institute and creators of The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy. They have written two books including the classic, *In Quest of the Mythical Mate*; appeared on over 50 television and radio programs including *The Today Show* and been quoted in countless publications including *The New York Times* and *Oprah*.

1

Set the Stage

You start with setting the stage.

You could say something like this:

Communication is the single most common presenting problem of most couples who come for therapy. What you are asking for is normal.

Sometimes getting some specific tools is effective when the tools are applied regularly. However, sometimes there are other challenges that interfere with applying the skills and knowledge.

So, let's first explore the challenges of good communication.

Then you could proceed by asking a few questions:

- Who are your best role models for good communication?
- In your own family growing up, how often did you see your parents getting into conflicts and working them out in front of you?
- Did your parents ever talk about how they worked things out?

Very few children see or hear their parents work out conflict. And few children are actually taught how to make it happen. Without role models or instruction, most adults simply lack the emotional capacity they need for dealing effectively with disagreements.

By explaining this, you are normalizing the couple's challenges.

2

Understand the Couple's Pattern

You'll need to understand more about the couple's pattern. Ineffective communication patterns are repetitive. The questions below help you get that information in a way that avoids simply rehashing a recent argument:

- When you are at your best, what are the constructive things you do to make your communication go better?
- When you are at your worst, what do you do that gets in the way of good communication?

3

Help the Couple Understand their Pattern

Most couples are not able to describe their patterns. They know what the other does that is painful, but often have little insight into themselves.

At the end of this document you will find a handout that you may copy and use with couples. Introduce this client handout, ***Ineffective Behaviors Partners Use to Cope***, to help each partner understand their own behavior that results in poor communication.

Give each partner a copy of the handout and have them circle their own typical behaviors on the page.

As they take ownership of their effective behaviors and begin to understand their partner's as well, they are starting the journey of effective individual change. With your support and assistance, new behaviors can take root and grow.

4

Identify What the Partners Desire from Each Other

You might say to both partners, “You say you need to communicate better. Let’s look at ways you might do that.”

You can increasingly build understanding around the communication difficulties by drilling deeper with the following questions:

- What could your partner do to be a better communicator?
- And then what could they do? And then what?
- Do you think they know the sequence you just described?
- What is your theory about why they don’t do what you just described?
- What would the effect be on you if they communicated in just the way you described? And then what? And then what?
- Do you think anything is required of you to help them communicate in this manner? Or do you just describe what to do and then wait?
- What do you think would be required of you to help them?
- How easy or simple would this be for you?
- What would make this challenging for you?

Then you can ask the other partner the same set of questions.

5

Wrapping up the Session and Looking Forward

Before ending the session, review the benefits of better communication and summarize what gets in the way of better communication for both partners. Explain to them that by doing this, you **and they** are starting to do something that goes even beyond effective communication.

Point out that you are talking about the kind of life they want to build together. Tell them in your next session you will spend more time defining the kind of partner each one aspires to be in order to build the kind of life and relationship they want to create. At that point you will help them look at what they want to do to be more effective when their communication isn't working.

Reassure the couple that you will help them define their individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner they aspire to be, and together you will review the skills and knowledge necessary to work towards that goal.

Ongoing effective communication requires respect, openness, and persistence.

Doing all of this sets the stage for collaborative work between you and the couple and the couple themselves. And you've done it in a way where neither partner feels blamed or wrong!

Yes, you've used their common presenting problem to demonstrate that a loving, thriving relation is not so simple after all. But that it is indeed possible!

Ineffective Behaviors Partners Use to Cope

- ✘ Blame
- ✘ Always be right
- ✘ Defensive
- ✘ Name calling
- ✘ Pout
- ✘ Sulk
- ✘ Get impatient
- ✘ Withdraw
- ✘ Attack
- ✘ Deny
- ✘ Lie
- ✘ Intimidate
- ✘ Get stubborn
- ✘ Keep secrets
- ✘ Use contempt
- ✘ Belittle
- ✘ Manipulate
- ✘ Involve the kids in arguments
- ✘ Dominate
- ✘ Diagnose
- ✘ Provoke guilt
- ✘ Escape to work
- ✘ Shame my partner
- ✘ Stonewall
- ✘ Interrupt
- ✘ Make fun of
- ✘ Nag
- ✘ Sarcasm
- ✘ Be condescending
- ✘ Yell to drown each other out
- ✘ Compete
- ✘ Be judgmental
- ✘ Bring up old issues
- ✘ Talk about other's (family) relations
- ✘ Leave, walk out without taking a time out
- ✘ Close minded
- ✘ Tell what partner feels
- ✘ Reject
- ✘ Use the silent treatment
- ✘ Change subject
- ✘ Distract
- ✘ Put down
- ✘ Dismiss partner
- ✘ Criticize



Learn about the Developmental Model Program

To get deeper learning using the Developmental Model created by Pete and Ellyn, you might also be interested in learning more about The Developmental Model Program.

While we only open the program up a couple of times per year, you can [learn more about it here.](#)

