



Central Iowa  
Psychological Services  
Compassionate, Whole Person Care, Where You Matter  
2007 Summer Newsletter



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# Marriage and Relationships Today

## Suggestions for Making Your Marriage/Relationship Thrive

Most any marriage counselor will tell you that one of the most common problems observed when couples come for help is “poor communication skills.” Often people get into trouble in their marriages because they have not developed their ability to listen non-defensively and the skills to communicate empathy AND more importantly to stay non reactive. That is, often, what you do NOT say or communicate (e.g., emotional reactivity), is more important than what you do say or communicate.

### Barriers to Communication

These are a few of the things that often prevent people from communicating effectively in a way that is acceptable to each person:

- Not knowing how to communicate effectively.
- Not taking the time to think through what you want to say before saying it.
- Lack of awareness of your own feelings and/or thoughts (beliefs, values, interpretations, attributions).
- Not finding out what your partner is thinking and/or feeling (and there is a difference).
- Fear of revealing too much of yourself.
- Fear of your partner’s anger or disapproval.
- Not knowing what to say.
- Not knowing what NOT to say.
- Thinking that you must respond immediately to whatever your partner says.
- Thinking that you must report every thought and/or feeling that you have at all times.
- Trying to talk when still angry.
- Not wanting to “hurt your partner’s feelings” and so not being honest and open.

## Empathy and Acceptance

We usually marry because we want to spend the rest of our lives with our chosen partner. Often we have every hope of growing together and creating a relationship that makes us (and our partner) feel emotionally balanced and healthy. Two factors that are necessary for this to happen are empathy and acceptance – of each other as well as each person of themselves.

Empathy is the capacity to know what the other is feeling/thinking as if you were them, but without losing the “as if” quality.

Demonstrating empathy and acceptance is critical to maintaining a strong relationship. Here are some communication skills that can enable you to create a climate of empathy, acceptance, understanding and non-reactivity.

## Active Listening

Active listening is a way of communicating that creates a climate of empathy, acceptance, and understanding.

- It is at least a two-step response to a statement made by your partner.
- It includes reflecting back what emotions you detected in their statements, and perhaps the thoughts behind the emotion(s).

*This is what active listening sounds like:*

*“Sounds like you’re upset about what happened at work.”*

*“You seem very annoyed by my lateness -- are you?”*

Active listening is a valuable skill because it demonstrates that you understand what your partner is saying and how he or she is feeling about it...that is, acceptance without agreement.

- Active listening means satisfactorily restating, in your own words, what the other person has said.
- It’s a check on whether your understanding of their position is correct and accurate.
- It demonstrates that you are listening and that you are interested and concerned about your partner

Actively listening does not mean agreeing with the other person. The point is to demonstrate to your partner that you want to hear and understand his/her point of view. This is good for your relationship because:

- When someone demonstrates that they want to understand what we are thinking and feeling, we usually feel affirmed and that feels good to them and to us...we are more connected when this happens.
- This usually creates good feelings about the other person.
- Restating and checking understanding promotes better communication and fewer misunderstandings in the present (in the now) and sets the stage for more of the same in the future.
- The active listening process can slow down communication so that reactive and non-productive patterns of communication will be less likely to occur.

*Here are some more examples of active listening:*

*“You sound/seem really stumped about how to solve this problem.”*

*“Does it make you angry when you find errors on Joey’s homework?”*

*“Sounds like you’re really worried about Wendy.”*

*“You seem awfully busy right now. I’ll talk with you when you are less busy.”*

## More Communication Skills

Although space is limited in this newsletter, there are a few more communication skills that we want to mention:

1. Ask open-ended questions.
2. Make summary statements to check understanding.
3. Encourage your partner to open up and elaborate by using neutral questions and phrases.

1.) **Open-ended questions** often begin with “what” OR “how” BUT almost never “why.”

*“How are you feeling after what just happened?”*

Such open-ended questions can get the other person to open up and elaborate the way they want to. Asking these kinds of questions may get the other person involved by giving him or her a chance to tell what he or she thinks, knows or feels. These questions are designed to encourage your partner to talk...and for you to LISTEN. They can be useful when the other person is silent or reluctant to talk freely. They may also be useful in dealing with negative emotions (such as anger or fear), since they help encourage the other person to talk about (but not simply vent) feelings- BUT you must stay as non-reactive as possible lest your partner use your emotional reaction to their emotions as fuel for the fire of fighting, leading to a negative spiral in your communication.

2.) **Summary statements** sum up what you understand and hear your partner saying.

*“I understand that you think I often talk too much when we discuss things...is this correct?”*

A summary statement can enhance your partner’s self-esteem by showing that you were fully listening. It also helps you focus on facts, not just emotions. It helps your partner clarify his or her own thinking by hearing your summary. Summary statements also help you deal with multiple disagreements so you can deal with them

one by one. They help eliminate confusion by focusing on the relevant facts. Summary statements also help you separate the important issues from the more trivial ones.

**3.) Neutral questions and phrases** get your partner to open up and elaborate on the topic you are discussing.

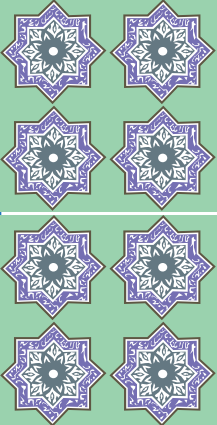
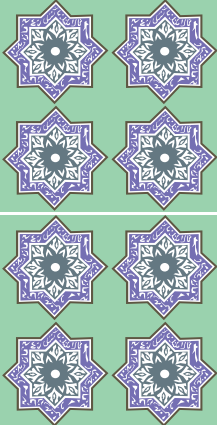
*“Do you have time to finish our discussion now or should we find another time to finish?”*

These questions are more focused than open-ended questions. They help your partner understand what you are interested in hearing more about. They help you gain more information. When you ask these kinds of questions, you demonstrate to your partner that you are interested and that you are listening.

### Business Skills for Marriages

You might be surprised to hear that the same skills that help people succeed in business can also be used to build a better marriage or relationship. Like any business, a marriage is a partnership of people. Many of the skills that make businesses run successfully—planning, organizing, setting goals and even devising a mission statement for the marriage or relationship— can be artfully applied to running your marriage or relationship successfully. These are some of the skills that will strengthen most any marriage:

1. Create a total vision of what you want your life to be like, based on your values; consider all areas.
2. Develop a long-range strategy.
3. Set short-term and long-term goals.
4. Outline or plan the steps that will help you accomplish your goals.
5. Organize projects.
6. Manage projects.
7. Manage people/kids/family (including your own feelings and reactivity to others).
8. Evaluate progress and results at semi-regular intervals.
9. Revise goals as needed.

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE NOT-SO-SECRET SECRET TO GOOD, OPEN, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Say what you mean, mean what you say. Be who you are. Let your words and how feel and how you act all match. Respect your own and the other’s right to be unique, different and human. Value openness, respect privacy. And keep your sense of humor!</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Herbert S. Roth, Ph.D.</p>	
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### Suggested Reading



- “The Passionate Marriage” by David Schnarch, Ph.D.
- “Extra Ordinary Relationships” by Roberta Gilbert, M.D.
- “Emotional Intelligence” by Daniel Goldman
- “Social Intelligence” by Daniel Goldman
- “Co-Dependent No More!” by Melody Beattie
- “When Chicken Soup Isn’t Enough” by Bradley P. Barris, Ph.D.
- “Love is Never Enough” by Aaron Beck, M.D.
- “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work” by John Gottman and Nan Silver
- “Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage” by John Gottman, Julia Schwartz Gottman, and Joan Declaire





# Central Iowa Psychological Services

Compassionate, Whole Person Care, Where You Matter

Central Iowa Psychological Services (CIPS) is comprised of a variety of professionals including Licensed Psychologists, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC), Licensed Marital and Family Therapists (LMFT), and Licensed Independent Social Workers (LISW) in both West Des Moines and Ames, IA. We have extensive experience actively collaborating with the medical profession and look forward to continued growth of this collaboration.

CIPS provides a wide range of clinical services including psychological testing and evaluations, individual psychotherapy, marital/couples counseling, family therapy, child assessment and treatment as well as psychological assessments and care of older adults and related nursing home consultations.

Complete resumes for all staff members are available on our web site at [www.iowaCounseling.com](http://www.iowaCounseling.com). Feel free to call or e-mail us any time with questions.

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