

9 Barriers to Overcoming Communication Difficulties

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1. Unclear rules for communication

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "I expect better communication, but regardless of what I say or do, he continues to communicate in ways I consider inappropriate or unacceptable."
- "I cannot stand it when he belittles me, but if I walk away he'll get mad at me."

Feelings:

- Frustrated, confused, inadequate, resentful.

Actions:

- Participating in conversations--actively or passively--that are non-productive or disrespectful.
Examples: (1) Continuing to talk, even though he is not listening. (2) Passively listening while he speaks unkindly. (3) Speaking unkindly because he. . . .

GENERAL INFORMATION

Everyone has his own personal rules or standards for effective communication, whether conscious of them or not. If you are not aware of or comfortable with your standards, you cannot take a stand or have your stand respected. Consequently effective communication becomes difficult or impossible. Often, two people attempt to communicate without clearly defined and mutually agreed upon rules. Therefore they

inadvertently risk stepping on each other's toes or, at the least, communicating ineffectively.

Example: The first time Curtis and Catherine came to my office, Catherine explained at length and in great detail about the communication problems they were having. Curtis hardly said a word. Finally, when I asked for his opinion, he began to explain, "If I say something she does not like, she mouths off--." She quickly interjected, "I may mouth off at times, but his mouth is always off."

As you and your companion clarify and agree on the basic rules for effective communication (the Three Rules For Good Communication), a common barrier to effective communication is removed.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Consider what will be different when you and your companion are communicating better. Think of times in the past when communication was successful. What was different during those times?

Example: As Lee struggled to recall times when he and Joyce were *not* arguing or avoiding each other, he discovered some interesting things. First, there actually were times when they got along better. Second, he came up with some things he could do differently to communicate better. Third, he began to feel more hopeful.

2. Consider what guidelines or standards you believe to be absolutely essential for effective communication. You might find it helpful to write down your ideas. A good place to begin is with the Three Rules for Good Communication--Be kind, Be Honest, and Have Constructive Intent. Make sure you include any additional rules you consider essential for good communication (such as discussing sensitive topics *only* when hunger, fatigue, and time are not issues).
 1. **Note:** If you are concerned that certain conversations tend to last longer than you wish, try setting a time limit (thirty minutes or so).
3. After you have completed your list, go back and elaborate on each item you consider essential for good communication. Be specific and include examples. For instance, what do you mean by kind? How will you know when he is treating you kindly?.

Example: Walter was accustomed to telling Carol what he thought she "should" or "shouldn't" do. In his mind, there was nothing disrespectful or unkind about his language. Carol, however, interpreted words like "should," "must," "cannot," and "have to," as coercive. It was not a matter of who was right. The important fact is that effective communication can only occur when *both* agree they are being treated kindly.

Solution: Either Walter uses different words ("I prefer" rather than, "You should") or Carol can remind herself his use of the word "Should" is not intended to be demanding or coercive.

4. After identifying and clarifying your rules for good communication, evaluate yourself according to your own standards. Notice where you are doing well and where you would like to improve.
5. Before you share your list with your companion, invite him to read this chapter and privately make up his own rules for good communication. Meanwhile, work on living up to your own standards.
6. After he has completed his list, and if he is willing, compare notes. If he does not want to read this chapter or make a list, but you believe he has given some thought to his guidelines, proceed anyway.
 1. **Caution:** If he is not clear on his guidelines and you are clear on yours, he may feel he is being controlled or manipulated.

Remember: As long as you are not trying to control him, any feelings he may have to the contrary do not change the facts.

7. In discussing your rules, emphasize the mutually agreed upon points.
 1. **Important:** Do not assume you know what the other means. Remember the meaning of "ASSUME" (making an ASS out of U and ME). Do not try to be a mind reader no matter how good you seem to be at it. *Instead*, ask questions. A good question to ask is "What do you mean by that?" After you both understand what each other's rules are, you will probably find them quite similar.
Note: Differences are more likely to reflect different points of view toward the same thing rather than fundamental differences. One person may provide a long, highly detailed list while the other provides a short, concise list covering the most important points. If you discover major differences that cannot be resolved in a mutually satisfactory manner, consider seeking professional help.
8. Whenever one of you appears to be violating a mutually agreed upon rule, signal time-out--place hands together to form a "T"--then kindly point out the violation. If both of you can agree and get back in bounds, the discussion can continue successfully; otherwise, kindly postpone the discussion to a later time. Agree in advance to use the "time-out" signal only when you sincerely care about your companion and are committed to improving the relationship.

Result: Calling time-out will be defined as an act of love rather than rejection or avoidance. Before you know it, you will both fit like a "T."

Example:

Ron: "Your voice seems to be getting a little loud. I think we're getting outside of the `Three Rules.'"

Kathy: "You are right, I 'm sorry."

Conversation continues.

Example:

Georgia: "I get the feeling you are trying to make me agree with you."

Mike: "You know I am right when it comes to disciplining the children."

Georgia (Time Out signal): "Mike, I love you and look forward to discussing this matter when we both can be more open-minded." Georgia then politely left the room, even though Mike wanted to continue the "discussion."

Result: Whether or not your companion agrees with your methods, you will eliminate arguments.

Important: Do not forget to follow up on any postponed discussions at a later time. With patience and practice, you will find it easier and easier to communicate by the rules you have set.

2. Difficult Distinguishing Thoughts and Feelings from Facts

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "This is the way it is."
- "She does not know what she is talking about."

Feelings:

- Unusually strong feelings attached to opinions.

Actions:

- Difficulty listening to and accepting others' viewpoints.
- Jumping to conclusions.
- Incorrectly assuming you know what someone else is thinking or feeling.

GENERAL INFORMATION

In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to clearly label an opinion an opinion, a feeling a feeling, and a fact a fact. Then facts are easily agreed upon, which sets the stage for respecting, understanding, and discussing each others thoughts and feelings.

If, however, you strongly believe that your thoughts or feelings accurately represent the facts when in fact they do not, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to reason with yourself or with others. When you observe another person's words and actions and assume you know more than you actually know (their private thoughts, feelings, or motives), misunderstandings will naturally result.

Consider, for instance, two people discussing the merits of a particular fruit, where one is basing his opinions on apples and the other is basing her opinions on oranges. If each thinks they are talking about the same fruit, try as they might, they will not be able to understand each other's opinions and feelings. He may talk about enjoying the crunchiness of the fruit, while she might insist it was not crunchy at all, but rather, soft and juicy. He may insist peeling the fruit was optional, while she might think he was crazy to think such a thing. They could argue about the rightness or wrongness of each other's opinion indefinitely and still not understand or agree.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

7. Compare situations where communication seems successful versus unsuccessful. Notice situations where communication goes well and opinions, feelings, and facts are clearly differentiated and labelled.

Examples:

Opinion stated as fact: "It takes too long to watch a baseball game"

Better: "It usually takes about three hours for a nine-inning baseball game to be played [Fact]. That's longer than I am comfortable with [Opinion]."

Opinion stated as fact: "You are a reckless driver."

Better: "Although you have never been in an accident, you do tend to exceed the speed limit [Facts], and I feel uncomfortable when you do so [Feeling/Opinion]."

Opinion stated as fact: "You are a good cook."

Better: "I like the way you cook [Opinion]."

8. In your conversations, practice clearly labelling an opinion as an opinion, a feeling as a feeling, and a fact as a fact.
1. **Key point:** Use words that indicate a fact only when describing objective facts. Watch for the words listed below which describe thoughts and feelings, and compare them to the words that suggest fact.

Thinking and Feeling Words	Fact Words
I think...	
I feel...	
I like...	
I believe...	
I prefer...	It is...
It seems to me...	You are...
It appears to me...	I know...
It is apt...	You are feeling...
It might...	You are thinking...
My point of view...	
My feeling is...	
My opinion is...	

9. For additional information, please see Core Principle 3: Feelings versus Facts.

10. Practice with your companion distinguishing thoughts and feelings from facts

- Agree to practice on a topic you have both had difficulty discussing.
- **Caution:** Do not select an extremely controversial situation.

11. Agree on the objective facts of the situation. You may wish to write down the facts you come up with.

- **Key point:** Agreeing on the facts is a basic and critical element of effective communication and initially may take the most effort. Discussing thoughts and feelings before you agree on the facts is apt to be counterproductive.

12. Discuss your thoughts and feelings about those facts, using the Three Rules for Good Communication (Be Kind, Be Honest, and Have Constructive Intent).

Result: As you improve in distinguishing thoughts and feelings from facts, you will discover more opportunities for agreement as well as ways to disagree without being disagreeable.

3. Difficulty Distinguishing Between What You Can and Cannot Control

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "If I improve myself--lose some weight or something--*then* he will be more interested in talking to me."
- "I will not criticize her for one week, *then* she will be more affectionate."
- "After all I have done, why isn't he more sensitive and open?"

Feelings:

- Helpless, easily upset, overly confident that all is well

Actions:

- Trying too hard to make communication go just right. Taking on too much or too little responsibility for communication.

GENERAL INFORMATION

In any relationship, there is a line that divides what you can control from what you cannot control. When that line is clear and each person takes responsibility for what he can control, effective communication is encouraged. When that line is unclear, a person often mistakenly focuses on and attempts to control things he cannot control. Besides obvious and disrespectful methods of manipulation, there is another type of control that is often unconscious and unintentional but just as damaging. This type of control is not a visible behavior; it occurs in the mind. It most often occurs when you believe you are responsible for causing or controlling what someone else thinks, feels, or does.

Result: Mental and emotional energy needlessly go down the drain and a power struggle often results over who controls what.

Example: When Sara is angry, she believes Todd made her feel that way. Her only options then are to fight or flee. She mistakenly focuses on Todd's behavior, which she cannot control, thinking *he* must change in order for her to feel better. A solution would be to focus on what you can do to contribute to better communication or, at the very least, not to make poor communication worse.

Thinking about trying to control someone you cannot control is like banging heads. You hurt not only yourself, but your companion as well. Whether your companion is conscious of your intentions or not, he will likely feel you are trying to control him even when your actions are above reproach.

Example: Laverne worked very hard all week long not to complain about anything to Ray.

Mistake: She believed controlling her behavior--a commendable thing to do--would somehow cause Ray to better control his behavior.

Example: James was determined to have peace in his home no matter what. He would not talk about anything he thought Melinda might get upset about.

Mistake: He was trying to promote peace--a worthwhile objective--by preventing Melinda from becoming upset.

Result: They talked very little or superficially; problems mounted rather than being resolved and Melinda felt James did not care about her feelings.

Fact: James cared so much about Melinda's feelings that he was carrying responsibility for controlling them.

Key point: It is the underlying motive, purpose, or intent of a your actions as well as the actions themselves that are so often controlling.

People who try to overcome behaving in controlling ways often fail because they only attempt to restrain their actions rather than examine and correct their underlying intentions. Those who rarely behave in controlling ways but who nevertheless have controlling thoughts tend to ignore or resist any suggestions that they are being controlling. Hence, they have difficulty improving how they communicate.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

5. When you are thinking about a situation with your companion where one or both of you are upset, focus your attention on what you can control rather than on what you cannot control.

Ask yourself:

"What aspects of this situation can I control and what aspects can't I control?"

6. Briefly describe the facts of the situation on paper as a video camera would record them (no opinions, feelings, or interpretations). Then draw a line down the center of the paper. On one side of the line write aspects of the situation you can control, and on the other side aspects you cannot control.
7. *Example:* Ken arrived home one hour later than he promised. Irene was upset. With a harsh voice, she said, "I've been waiting for over an hour. You are so selfish and inconsiderate that I can't believe I put up with you." Ken was confused and upset. With all the self-control he could muster, he politely told Irene he would be willing to discuss the matter after dinner when, hopefully, they could both talk within the Three Rules for Good Communication. He then left the room. To help him straighten out his thinking, he made a list of what he could and could not control in the situation.

8. Ken's List

Can Control	Cannot Control
The time I say I'll be home When I leave for home Whether or not I call if I am going to be late Whether or not I apologize How I react to Irene's behavior	Traffic conditions Irene's mistaken belief that I do not care about her feelings Her blood pressure Her voice tone Her belief that I am responsible for how she is feeling

9. *Result:* By drawing a clear and detailed line between what Ken could and could not control, he was able to relieve himself of accepting responsibility for the things he could not control while more fully accepting responsibility for the things he could control. He was excited to discover that he did not have to argue, defend, or condemn himself when Irene was upset. Instead, he decided to concentrate on being prompt and kindly postponing unhealthy conversations even though Irene misunderstood and felt upset at first.
10. Consider some of the things bothering you about the way you and your companion communicate. On another piece of paper with a line down the center, put the things you can control on one side of the line and the things you cannot control on the other side.
11. Select one thing on your list that bothers you that you can control. Make and implement a plan for doing something about it.
12. When you find yourself dwelling on some aspect of communication you cannot control, watch what happens; do not try to change your thinking at first. Just notice the consequences. Note especially how you tend to feel and act.
13. Examine your thoughts, especially when you or your companion are feeling uncomfortable or agitated. Practice distinguishing your controlling thoughts from your respectful thoughts. Be careful! Controlling thoughts--like counterfeit money--often look and feel like the real thing, but they are not.

Controlling: "If I do what he wants, *then* he will do what I want."

Respectful: "If I do what he wants, there is an increased likelihood or probability, he will choose to do what I want him to."

Controlling: "If I act a certain way, *then* he will feel a certain way."

Respectful: "If I act a certain way, he is more likely to feel . . ."

Controlling: "I upset him."

Respectful: "I am responsible for my actions, and he is responsible for his reactions."

Result: By increasing your awareness of whether you are focusing on what you can or cannot control and the results that follow, your mind will naturally tend to focus more on things you can control.

1. *Warning:* Just because your companion thinks or feels you are trying to control him does not necessarily mean you are doing so.

Key point: Feelings do not change facts.

Nevertheless, if your companion is feeling controlled, carefully examine your thoughts and underlying motives to see if anything is amiss.

14. When you are dwelling on things you cannot control ask yourself, "Do I really want to be thinking about this?" If not, practice thinking about or doing something you do have control over.

Result: You will create an environment where, in time, better communication is much more likely.

4. Difficulty focusing attention on your companion

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "I'd rather be doing something else, but I better at least look like I am paying attention. I can carry on a conversation while thinking about something else."

Feelings:

- Torn between two or more conflicting interests; stress.

Actions:

- Talking or listening to someone while thinking about or doing something else. Not looking at someone while they are talking.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Focusing your attention on the person with whom you are talking includes frequent eye contact, relevant comments, and avoiding distractions such as T.V., newspapers, and magazines. However, these actions alone--though important--are not enough to produce effective communication. It is also necessary to focus your thoughts and mental activity on the person. This is not always easy. Given all the pressures, responsibilities, interruptions, and distractions of life, it takes a great deal of effort and practice to give the quality of attention necessary to communicate effectively.

Example: Richard's wife and children liked to talk with him during breakfast. Although he loved his family deeply, he liked to read the newspaper during breakfast. His strategy was to do both at the same time. He could hear and answer their questions, while he also read the paper.

Problem: His family wondered how important they were to him, and he felt torn.

Solution: Do one or the other. Richard could put the paper down for a few minutes and give his family his undivided attention. Or he could ask them to allow him a few minutes to read the paper without interruption.

The amount of attention you give someone during a conversation can range from zero to one hundred percent. When you give one hundred percent of your attention, you will think, feel, and communicate better. In

addition, the other person will be apt to feel and appreciate your full attention.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Monitor on a scale of zero to one hundred the percent of attention you are giving various people and situations in your life.

Ask yourself,
"How much attention am I giving to the current situation?"

2. For instance, Richard might have answered seventy percent attention to the newspaper and thirty percent to the family. Consider how much attention you give in other situations (talking with a business associate, watching T.V., playing tennis, or listening to a sermon). Observe how the amount of attention you give varies depending on how much interest, energy, and self-discipline you have at the moment. Your increased awareness will allow you to give more attention to the current situation.

3. Give your companion permission to ask how much attention you are giving her at the moment.

Example: While riding in the car, LaVonne was telling Robert about her day. LaVonne wondered how much attention he was paying to what she was saying. Rather than assuming he was or was not listening, she said, "Robert, how much attention are you giving to what I am saying?"

Result: If Robert was not paying full attention, he might just begin to do so now that LaVonne has mentioned it. Or if he feels he really cannot fully listen at the moment, he could politely tell her he has so much on his mind he would rather talk later.

Important: Make sure to follow-up with the conversation at a later time.

4. Your choice: If your companion has the habit of not giving his full attention, you can interpret his behavior as something he is doing "to me." This results in hurt feelings or anger, leading to fleeing or fighting. Or you can interpret his behavior as a difficulty he has with personal communication, even if he seems to have little or no trouble paying attention in other situations.

1. **Key point:** Regardless of how you interpret his behavior, you have the right, if you wish, to participate only in conversations where both of you are giving your full attention.

5. When talking with your companion--especially when there is some discomfort or tension.

Ask yourself,
"How much attention am I giving to my companion versus the topic of discussion?"

6. *Example:* One day when I was in graduate school, I was sharing some supposedly profound things I learned with my wife, Shelly. She listened intently for quite awhile. Then she told me she felt like I was giving a lecture--that I was more interested in the topic than with her. Her comment surprised me and I assured her she was certainly more important to me than whatever I was talking about. She was not convinced, however.

7. I then took another look. I asked myself whether I was paying more attention to my topic or to her. I was humbled by my discovery. Despite my initial belief to the contrary, I was, in fact, more involved and excited about my ideas than I was about my wife at that moment.
 8. Remind yourself that the person you are talking with at any given time is more important than whatever you are talking about. Of course, the topic or information is important, but your companion's thoughts, feelings, and your relationship is of greater importance.
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5. Trying to get your companion to communicate better

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "How can I get through to him . . . to get him to listen to me, talk with me, accept me, and understand me?" "Why won't he . . . ?"

Feelings:

- Discouraged, frustrated, helpless, upset.

Actions:

- Coming on too strong. Walking on eggs so as not to upset him. Violating your own rules for good communication.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Wanting better communication can inadvertently develop into an attitude of trying too hard to get it. The intent to have better communication can inadvertently lead to manipulation. If, for instance, your companion is unable or unwilling to communicate better at the present time, any intent on your part *to make* him improve is apt to be disrespectful and will only make matters worse. Besides, if you push too long or too hard *you* may end up looking like the one who cannot communicate effectively.

Example: Art frequently complained that Vicki was trying to control him. In order to help Art realize she was not trying to control him, Vicki carefully examined every word before she spoke, making sure he could not possibly misinterpret her intentions. She walked on eggs because she tried so hard not to upset him. Despite her best efforts he would still become upset and accuse her of trying to control him. Her resulting frustration led her to try so hard to get him to admit she was not trying to control him that she inadvertently ended up doing the very thing she sincerely wanted to avoid--she tried to control Art.

Example: David had the habit of regularly putting his wife down. The harder Wanda tried to get him to treat her more respectfully, the more critical he became. David, too, wanted to be kinder, but often his habit was

more powerful than his desire to be gentle. Besides, he viewed some of Wanda's efforts to get him to change as controlling and he was not going to let anyone run his life. I suggested an approach to them that they both accepted that broke the bind they were in. Wanda agreed to stop trying so hard to get him to treat her better. David agreed to give her \$1 each time he criticized her without first giving her a genuine compliment. The following week Wanda smiled and said to David, "Why did you have to change your habit so fast? I thought I would get rich."

Even in situations where your companion is not initially as responsive as David is in the previous example, it is still essential to respect his *right* to communicate ineffectively--even though that certainly is not your preference. It is also essential to respect your right to consider your options and do what you think is best when communication is not going well. For example, you have the right to periodically ask him if he is ready to work toward better communication. Even when he is not yet ready, you can continue hoping he will someday change his mind. In the meantime, remember: You do not have to participate in conversations that violate your rules for effective communication. Rather than trying too hard *to get* your companion to communicate better there is a lot you can do *to give* him greater opportunities to do so.

Key point: The attitude or intent underlying your actions is at least as important as your actions.

Example: Doug tells his companion he will no longer carry on a conversation while her attention is divided between the magazine and him. Is his motive to get her to put the paper down, or is his motive to simply send her a message indicating what he is or is not willing to do?

Caution: His companion's thinking or interpreting his intentions to be controlling does not necessarily make them so. Only Doug can tell what his underlying intent is. By his actions alone, his intent could only be guessed.

The difference between the intent *to get* or *to give* is often subtle. Some emotional clues, however, can help. When your intent is *to give*, you usually feel calm and comfortable with what you are saying or doing. When your intent is *to get*, you usually feel agitated, frustrated, irritated, or afraid.

Key point: It is better to give than to get--you cannot always control what you get, but you can control what you give.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. When you are feeling frustrated or irritated with your companion, ask yourself what your intent or motive is for the conversation.

Ask yourself:

"Is my intent to give?"
or
"Is my intent to get?"

2. Notice the differences in the underlying intent in the following statements:

To Get	To Give
To get him to listen to reason To get him to admit you are right To get your point across To get him to understand To get him to show some emotion To get him to pay some attention To get him to treat you kindly	To give - or, to share - your thoughts or feelings To give a statement of what your are willing or not willing to do To give him opportunities to share his thoughts or feelings To give your attention To give understanding To give love

3. During the next week, observe your motives or intentions as you think about wanting better communication. Notice how you act and feel when you are trying to get him to communicate better.
1. **Key point:** Even though your actions may be respectful, if your intent is to get him to change--as opposed to hoping he will change--you are out of line.
4. If he is reluctant to communicate at a particular time, remind yourself of an important rule:

"Only talk when both of you want to talk?"

5. **Reason:** If you use a sledge hammer to get information out of him, you are apt to end up with a headache.
6. **Better:** Ask him "Is this a good time to talk?" Or "Do you want to talk?" If he doesn't answer, "Yes," don't push him--try again another time.
1. **Important:** Do not think for him. If he does not verbally tell you what he is thinking, do not try to analyze and figure out what is going on in his mind. Even if you usually guess right about what he is thinking, do not assume so until you know for sure. Do not speak for him. Until he is ready to make the effort to explain what he is thinking, do not take that responsibility away by speaking for him.
7. When your companion has a wall up, it is easy to get into a habit of analyzing, assuming, or guessing what is going on behind it--not to mention attempting to break through it. Rather than going through such taxing mental gymnastics, simply begin inviting him to come out from behind his wall. Some ways to invite:
- - When you wish to discuss a sensitive topic, preface the discussion by explaining what you would like to discuss. Then, ask if he would be willing to discuss it. If he declines, at least you have given him something to think about. If he accepts, you have given him a choice and a chance to mentally prepare for a constructive conversation.

- Write a letter. Suggest that he may wish to respond with a letter, too. The reason for this is that some people are more comfortable with written correspondence than verbal communication. I suggest including three parts to a letter:
 - 1.
 2. Your appreciation for some of the things he does (or does not do).
 3. A few of your concerns about communication.
 4. Your hopes for finding ways to communicate better.
 - Offer to meet with him for 30 to 45 minutes to discuss a mutually agreed upon topic within the Three Rules for Good Communication (Be Kind, Be Honest, and Have Constructive Intent). Offer to take him out to a movie and dinner with the money you save by not having to pay a marriage counselor.
 - *Caution* If he is not initially responsive, resist the tendency to give up or blast him. One husband approached his wife almost thirty times before they successfully discussed a particular topic. He showed a tremendous amount of self-discipline, respect, and patience. It finally paid off.
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6. Making excuses for your companion

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "He can't help it, because . . ."

Feelings:

- Overly patient, secretly resentful.

Actions:

- Ignoring or neglecting your own needs.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Having compassion for your companion's communication difficulties is highly commendable. If, however, you are making excuses for any behavior outside of the Three Rules for Good Communication or for his avoidance of communication, you are doing him a disservice. How is he going to have a chance to accept responsibility for how he communicates (or does not communicate) when you are making excuses for him? By providing excuses you are tempting him to think you are the problem and are somehow responsible for the solution.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Think about the various reasons or excuses you give for his poor communication. Make a brief list of situations where you and your companion are having difficulties communicating. Next to each situation, write an excuse for his behavior.
2. During the next week, observe the thoughts that tend to go through your mind in response to his undesirable behavior. Notice how quickly and creatively you can justify and excuse his behavior.
3. Try an experiment. For one week, whenever you start to think of an excuse, remind yourself he is responsible for his actions.

Say to yourself:

"Regardless of my imperfections and life's challenges, he is responsible for his actions."

4. Observe your reactions to the experiment.
 1. **Caution:** Once you eliminate excuses and recognize his responsibility for his behavior, you may find yourself feeling more frustrated and resentful than before.
Solution: Focus your attention on what you can control--mainly yourself and your responses--rather than on his difficulties with communicating.
5. If he has not yet accepted responsibility for his behavior do not participate in a fruitless debate trying to get him to accept responsibility. Instead, respect his right to have his difficulties, even if he does not realize or admit them. Meanwhile, strive to live up to your standards for good communication.

Result: You will provide him with the best environment for objectively examining himself and, hopefully, reconsidering his view of how he communicates.

7. Blaming yourself for his excessive criticism

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "Something must be wrong with me."
- "He will not talk to me or when he does, he is critical. I must have done something to cause this."

Feelings:

- Guilty, inadequate, confused.

Actions:

- Constantly trying to change yourself to satisfy him.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Your actions and imperfections are, of course, your responsibility. Even though your actions provide a positive or negative influence, his reactions

to you, regardless of whether you are behaving reasonably or not, are first and foremost his responsibility--not yours. No matter how much you improve yourself, it is still up to him to decide whether he wishes to accept the responsibility of looking at himself objectively and making appropriate improvements.

Key pointt: The more you blame yourself or think that change on your part will cause him to change, the easier you make it for him to believe you are the problem and he has no part in it.

Common question: "How do I know if I am the problem or not?"

Answer: You can apply the "Rule of One Hundred." Imagine that one hundred reasonable people witnessed something you or your companion did.

Ask yourself:

"Would one hundred reasonable people judge my behavior or his behavior as reasonable or unreasonable?"

Common question: "How do I know if I am behaving in a reasonable manner?"

Answer: Your responsibility is to communicate so that a reasonable person has a reasonable chance to understand. It is not your responsibility *to make* someone understand.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Continue working to improve yourself in a reasonable manner, not because you are responsible for his actions but because you are responsible for your actions.
2. For one week observe how adept you are at blaming yourself and accepting responsibility for how he communicates (or does not communicate).
3. Frequently remind yourself of what you already know: Even if you corrected the main things he gets upset about, there would probably be other things to take their place.
4. When he reacts by refusing to talk or by talking in an unkind way, practice reminding yourself that his behavior (or misbehavior) is his responsibility--not yours.

Say to yourself:

"His behavior is his choice and responsibility, not mine?"

5. When he behaves in an undesirable manner, do you take it personally by thinking: "He is doing it *to me*," or "He is doing it because *of me*?" It is better to simply remind yourself that "he is doing it" period!
Example: When Diane had hurt feelings, Tom tended to become quiet and withdrawn. Diane thought, "Whenever I am upset, he will not talk to me."
Better: "Whenever I am upset, he becomes quiet and withdrawn." Notice how you feel and tend to act when you add the, "To me."
6. If your automatic reaction is to take his comments personally, practice developing a different response:
 -
 - Take several 3 x 5 cards and write something like:

"His undesirable behavior is simply that - unreasonable - not a personal reflection on me?"

- Place the cards where only you can see them, at least a dozen times a day.
- Whenever you observe unreasonable criticism or avoidance of communication, whether his or someone else's, let your observation serve as a trigger to remind you of what is written on the cards. Say to yourself: "His undesirable behavior is simply that--undesirable--not a personal reflection on me."

Result: The more often he acts that way the sooner you will stop taking his actions personally.

Example: Tim was frequently angry about the money Dorothy spent on counseling. One evening, after his latest outburst, Dorothy responded differently. She calmly said, "One thing I got out of all the money I spent is that I now know you are not being rude *to me*. You are just being plain rude."

5. *Caution:* Usually it is better to keep this new insight to yourself, unless of course, you believe it would be helpful for him to know.

8. Basing Your Security or Happiness on Your Companion

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "How can I feel secure when he spends more time with work, church, or recreation than he does with me?"
- "I cannot be happy unless he . . . "

Feelings:

- Insecure, easily upset.

Actions:

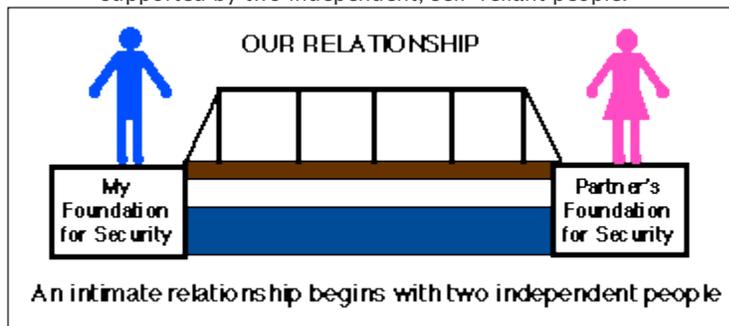
- Walking on eggs so as not to displease him. Nagging.

GENERAL INFORMATION

In a close personal or family relationship the natural inclination toward self-reliance can deteriorate. There can be a tendency for one or both parties to lean a little too much on the other. This can begin a slow, almost imperceptible, erosion of a healthy sense of independence and

self-reliance. Without self-reliance, it is difficult to effectively communicate in an independent *and* intimate manner.

Example: Prior to marriage, Dawn was considerate of her family and friends' feelings; nevertheless, she made independent decisions based on what she thought was best. She was successful in several leadership positions at school and at church, where she demonstrated the ability to negotiate and make reasonable decisions even if everyone did not always agree. Yet in marriage she adopted the misguided notion that her happiness and security somehow depended more on her husband than upon herself. Peace at any price became her motto. *Result:* She became overly hesitant to communicate clearly, and she avoided taking any firm stands. Her ability to confidently discuss issues and to contribute to making mutually agreeable decisions became paralyzed. *Key point:* Like two pillars, independently yet jointly supporting a bridge, a healthy relationship is likewise supported by two independent, self-reliant people.



STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Ask yourself which is more important: good communication with your companion or managing yourself in a healthy, well-balanced manner. Obviously both are important, but if you put communication ahead of taking care of yourself, you will inadvertently create a barrier to better communication.
2. Think of a time in your life when you were particularly independent and self-reliant. You might even write a brief description of a poignant event during that time in your life. For the next month, review and try to relive that event for a few minutes, three times a day. This will encourage you to stand up straight and not lose your balance when he gets off balance or withdrawn.

Result: As you become more independent and self-reliant, like a pillar of a bridge, you will be in a better position to promote good communication.

3. Whenever you observe your companion behaving in a way you do not like, remind yourself that your first priority is to manage your own life in a well-balanced and reasonable way. Although managing yourself better will not cause your companion to communicate better, you will begin to feel better about yourself and create an environment more conducive to good communication.
4. When you are frustrated by the lack of good communication, A.C.T.:
 1. **A**cknowledge your feelings and the facts of the situation ("I am feeling frustrated" and "It is the way it is: he is unable or unwilling to communicate any better for the time being.")
 2. **C**onsider the available choices. Broaden your range of activities, develop more friends, take a class, exercise, read a book, develop a hobby, or get involved in church or community activities so you are not so dependent on your companion for happiness.
 3. **T**ake constructive action.

Caution: If he decides to communicate better (and hopefully he will), be prepared to reevaluate your schedule of activities to provide enough time to work on improving communication.

9. Not Knowing How to Proceed with a Companion Who Will Not Cooperate

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "No matter what I do, he won't respond. So what do I do now?"

Feelings:

- Trapped, frustrated.

Actions:

- Fighting, withdrawing, or continuing as usual.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Sometimes, even after removing the barriers that get in the way of communicating better, a companion does not seem to be making any progress. While remembering it is his choice to work toward better communication or not, you can still do some things to increase the chances of him reconsidering.

Key point: Make sure any steps you take are free from any intent to control or get others to communicate better. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this. The recommended steps are intended to help you maintain your integrity and allow you to kindly and firmly exercise your right to only communicate within the rules you have set--*not* force others to change. However, it is all right, to hope others will respond in a cooperative manner.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Write your companion a letter--again, if you have already done so--including:
 - What you appreciate about him.
 - Your concerns about developing and implementing some mutually agreed upon rules for communication.
 - Your hopes for better communication.
 - An invitation to respond in any way he prefers (in a letter, in person, or over the phone).
2. If, after patient, respectful and persistent efforts, he still seems unwilling to discuss and agree on rules for effective communication, you have an important decision to make:
 - First, to continue participating, whether actively or passively, in conversations where one or both of you are acting outside of your rules.

Result: Possible illusion of harmony despite unsatisfactory communication.

- Or second, only participate in conversations where both of you are adhering to the rules you have set.

Result: Probably less communication with some disharmony to begin with until new habits are developed.

Common Concern: "If I stick to my guidelines, we will hardly ever talk."

Answer: It is much better, at first, to talk successfully less often than to continue talking ineffectively more often.

3. If your companion repeatedly violates one or more of your guidelines, even after you have asked him not to, it may be necessary to take some practical, though possibly unpleasant and unpopular steps.

Common Question: "How do you deal with a companion persisting in unreasonable behavior?"

Answer: The answer is simple but surprising: "You do not." To attempt to reason with someone who is being unreasonable--is unreasonable. To even sit passively while your companion continues to act unreasonably is like applauding bad behavior. You unwittingly encourage it.

THREE STEPS FOR *NOT* DEALING WITH UNREASONABLE BEHAVIOR

Step 1:

Kindly make a true, objective statement.

Example: "Ted, for the last three minutes you have blamed me for your unhappiness, told me I was incompetent as a person and as a wife, and have done so loudly enough for our neighbors to hear. I will not sit here and listen to this for one more minute."

If his response is reasonable, good communication could, perhaps, proceed. Otherwise, go on to Step 2.

Step 2:

Politely end the "conversation."

Key point: Say something kind before you postpone the conversation.

Example: "Ted, I love you and want to finish our discussion at a later time when we are both able to talk in a more respectful manner." Do not be surprised if he does not appreciate your polite exit, but at least you lived up to your standards. Even if he accuses you of running away or causing the communication problems "because you are so . . .," do not take the bait and get hooked. If you do, you will be promoting the very thing you object to by communicating outside of your own rules for good communication.

Key Point: When arguing has become a habit in a relationship, ceasing to argue creates a temporary void. Strive to fill the void by doing positive things (leaving a loving note on the car seat, taking a walk, or going out for ice cream).

Step 3:

Follow up later on the postponed discussion. Whether within a week, several days, or a few hours, kindly approach your companion and let him know of your desire to politely discuss and resolve the previously postponed discussion.

Example: "Linda, I know things didn't go so well when we tried to talk about . . . , but I would like to try again when you are willing."

Sometimes, at first, it is easier to write a little note or talk over the phone, rather than talk face-to-face.

Caution: If your intent or motive in taking any of these steps is to *make* your companion communicate better, you are out of line. A more constructive purpose is to exercise your right to set and live up to your guidelines or standards for good communication and to give your companion the opportunity to do so or not to do so--hoping, of course, he will.

SUCCESS STORY

Lila loved her husband very much but was saddened and frustrated because they rarely talked. They could talk about superficial things but not about things that really mattered without Brent getting upset. She said he was a good man but somewhat insensitive to her feelings. Often Brent saw Lila as too emotional. He had no problem communicating as an executive who managed complex international negotiations for a large Silicon Valley corporation. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not seem to understand his wife's feelings. She would become frustrated and get down on herself or come on too strong with him.

Lila told me Brent was not willing to come in for counseling since he sincerely believed he was an expert in communication. Besides, he believed *she* was the one who had the problem anyway. "How have you been able to put up with such a lack of communication for so many years?" I asked. Lila explained that at first she thought his lack of communication was due to the stress of a new job. Then, as the children came along, she thought perhaps the strain of family life was a little too much for Brent. She just kept hoping things would get better--but they did not.

HESITATING TO TAKE A STAND

"Do you have the right to expect better, more personal communication from your husband?" I asked. She hemmed and hawed and finally said, "Yes, but I can't stand it when he gets so mad at me." She was more concerned about avoiding his wrath than taking concrete steps to promote better communication. I suggested that we did not want to intentionally upset him. However, if he easily got upset when asked to do something with which he was uncomfortable, she might expect him to feel upset when she asked him to communicate better at home.

I could see Lila had very little practice asking Brent to do something he might feel uncomfortable doing. I explained she had not given her husband a fair chance to deal with his discomfort and decide, perhaps, that he might want to learn to communicate as effectively at home as he does at work. She would not even allow him a good, healthy week or two to get beyond feeling upset before she would go back to reluctantly accepting things as they were. Sometimes, after he had been upset for a few days, she would feel so guilty or anxious, she would try extra hard to please him so they could once again have a good feeling between them, even though the original problem was being pushed under the rug.

At other times Lila would get so frustrated with his lack of communication that she would unwittingly do things to get a reaction out of him even if it was a negative reaction. She might burn his steak, say something stupid, or argue unreasonably. Her manner of dealing with her frustration and disappointment only strengthened his belief that she was not nearly as rational as he was.

REGAINING SELF-RELIANCE

Before Lila could learn to stand firm in a kind and respectful manner, it was necessary to rediscover what she had forgotten about herself since her marriage (that she was a basically self-reliant and independent person). I asked her to repeatedly remind herself that although she wanted her husband to be happy, his happiness was not the foundation of her life. Within a couple of weeks she was ready to take action.

Lila was not sure, however, whether she was willing to risk experiencing some current disharmony in exchange for the possibility of better communication in the future. As we talked, it became clear she had traded her former sense of self-reliance and independence for the illusion of marital harmony. As long as she did not require a reasonable level of communication, Brent seemed content. She agonized over

whether to take a stand or continue to tolerate a substandard relationship. Finally, Lila decided it was unhealthy for Brent, the children, as well as herself, to continue pretending all was well.

TAKING A FIRM, LOVING STAND

Even before saying anything to Brent, some important changes were taking place in the way they communicated. Lila had drawn a line. She was no longer willing to accept the way they communicated (or did not communicate). She knew she did not have the right to try to make Brent change, but she did not have to put up with things the way they were. No longer would she pretend all was well or try so hard to get him to talk that she ended up looking like *she* had the problem. Brent was beginning to sense something was different. Her determination not to settle for less, despite her fears and anxieties, sent a new and clear signal to Brent that the current level of communication was unacceptable.

Next, she invited Brent out for a business lunch—a marital business lunch. She had three objectives for their meeting: (1) tell him how much she loved him; (2) share her concerns about the lack of quality in their communication; and (3) share her hopes for more frequent and personal conversations. The lunch went well, but after a few weeks Brent was back to being as critical or aloof as usual.

Lila wanted to know if there was anything else she could do. I reminded her of the importance of respecting Brent's right to not communicate better if that were, indeed, his choice. "There is more you can respectfully do if he continues to be unresponsive," I assured her. I warned her, however, when Brent realized she meant what she said about only talking with him when they both adhered to the Three Rules for Good Communication (Be Kind, Be Honest, and Have Constructive Intent), he might mistakenly think she was trying to control him or make him change.

I cautioned Lila, "If your intent is to make him change, you are out of line, and your attitude could contaminate and sabotage the otherwise constructive things you are doing." If, however, her intent was to strengthen the relationship, send Brent clear signals, and kindly stand up for what she believed in, she would be creating a healthy opportunity for change. She assured me her intentions were constructive and respectful of his rights.

I then gave Lila some specific actions to take, if, after kindly and lovingly doing everything else she could think of, he still did not cooperate. I suggested she: (1) let him know of her love, her concerns about their communication, and her hopes for a better relationship; (2) without becoming grumpy or aloof, cease joking, hugging, kissing, or otherwise doing things dishonestly suggesting she was satisfied with the relationship; (3) keep busy doing constructive activities, including something just for herself; and (4) verbally or in writing, regularly reaffirm her love for him and her commitment to the relationship.

RESPONDING TO THE CHANGES

It was difficult for Lila to remain strong *and* pleasant at the same time, but she worked very hard at it. Brent's initial response was to communicate even less. Then, after a few weeks, he became very upset as he incorrectly believed she was trying to change him. He said some cruel and upsetting things that in the past would have caused Lila to cave in. This time, fortunately for both of them, she did not take his comments personally, realizing he was having difficulty with the changes she was making.

After about two months of counseling with Lila, I was pleased to receive a call from Brent. I was impressed with his courage and humility. Here he was, a powerful executive who prided himself on being able to resolve even the most complex management and corporate negotiations, asking for help in communicating better with his wife. Brent told me that at first

he thought Lila had a problem. Then after she began counseling he thought maybe the counselor had a problem. But, after awhile he realized that Lila was not trying to change him but was doing what she thought best for her and their relationship. She even seemed happier and more in control of herself.

Brent confided he had never felt comfortable dealing with emotions. As a child he had not been raised in a very open and warm family environment. He was taught to be responsible and work hard but not how to communicate intimately in a family setting--especially if there were differences of opinion accompanied by strong feelings. I found it especially easy to point out to him the principles of communication he had so effectively mastered in the business world, and then show him how to transfer those skills into his own home. We set some specific goals and laid out a plan of action he began to implement immediately.

WORKING TOGETHER AGAIN

Brent made great progress and within a month I suggested Lila join us to begin the final phase of the marital therapy. She was thrilled when Brent thanked her for sticking to her guns. He added that if she had not been so nice, he did not think he would have responded so well.

Then to further strengthen their marriage and communication skills, I suggested instead of continuing to see me, they arrange to hold a weekly Marital Council Meeting. The guidelines I gave them are included in the chart below.

Lila and Brent left excited and optimistic about using a weekly Marital Council Meeting to continue their progress in improving their communication skills.

In many relationships where there is a lack of communication, the problems can be successfully worked on and resolved without professional help. Even when only one companion is willing to acknowledge a problem, that person can, just by removing the barriers he has control over, dramatically increase the possibilities of developing a better relationship. If you kindly hold firm to what you believe is right, your partner usually (though not always) will respond--sooner or later.

Marital Council Meeting

- Meet for approximately thirty minutes, or as long as you both adhere to the [Three Rules for Good Communication](#).
- Keep a record of what you discuss in a notebook, so you can refer to it at each subsequent meeting.
- Consider adopting a regular agenda where you discuss the following:
 - *Appreciation*: Share what you appreciate about your companion, especially during the last week.
 - *Desired Improvements*: Share a few improvements you would like to make in yourself; then, courageously ask your companion for a few suggestions for you.
 - *Planned Improvements*: Decide on one or two specific things each of you will strive to improve during the week. Perhaps you can have some fun by offering each other a back-rub, dinner out, or another treat as an incentive.