



CoupleTALK

Enhancing Your Relationship

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

An informal personal study course

Lessons and evaluation written by:

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Family Systems. School of Family Studies and Human Services.

Activity cards written by:

Trudy Rice

Family and Consumer Sciences County Extension Agent, Douglas County.



CoupleTALK

Enhancing Your Relationship

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

Intimate relationships take hard work. They do not just happen—they require attention. This *Couple Talk* program is designed to help you give more attention to your relationship.

Couple Talk emphasizes skill-building. It also stresses a process of growth and behavior change to help the relationship become stronger and more satisfying to both of you. The process is *risky* and it takes time. It requires partners to reveal more of themselves and accept what their mates are revealing.

This type of structured program for enriching your relationship may provide encouragement when you get busy or feel a little afraid—or when you are tempted to quit the relationship. This booklet contains six lessons. The accompanying activities help you learn and practice skills. You may want to spend one week on each lesson and its suggested activities, or you may want to create your own timetable. It is helpful to set aside a certain time each day to focus on *Couple Talk*. Try to avoid distractions. Make it *prime* time, not *left-over* time.

Helpful Hints:

Following are some helpful hints to assist you focus on your relationship while you are working on *Couple Talk*. It helps to review these tips periodically.

- Set aside a certain time each day to share with each other.
- Share only positive thoughts, feelings and wants during this sharing time. This is not a time to complain or debate.
- Emphasize the sharing of feelings like joy, happiness and excitement.

- Avoid evaluating your partner's feelings.
- Speak for yourself, not for your partner. Use "I...", not "you"
- Use words that show appreciation. "I like it when you....."
- Learn to listen.
- Have a time-out rule. Whenever one partner does not want to continue the discussion say, "Time out."
Knowing this option is available will keep you from feeling trapped. Set another time to continue the discussion.
- Focus on the present.
- Remember that marriage or an intimate relationship is a process. It changes over time. New skills are needed at different phases, and old ones need to be continually sharpened.

Words of Caution

Not everyone will want to participate in this type of enrichment program. For example, your partner may be mildly reluctant or extremely resistant to participating in *Couple Talk*. If that is the case, then what?

It is possible for an individual to gain from a couple enrichment self-study program, even if the partner chooses not to participate. You can read the information, develop an understanding of the concepts and skills discussed, and practice the skills to incorporate them into your own behavior. You can feel good about your own personal growth and what you are learning. However, your new knowledge and behaviors can backfire on you unless you follow these guidelines:



1. Discuss the program with your partner before you begin. It is best to let him or her know your intentions and your reasons for wanting to do this. It should *not* be an attempt to manipulate, but a way to stimulate your own growth and contribute to the growth of the relationship.

2. Be accepting of your partner's decision not to participate. *Do not* criticize or place blame, as such behavior will likely cause a negative reaction from your partner.

3. Share your new knowledge with your partner. Discuss what you are learning and what you think it means for your relationship. Let your partner know what you are learning before involving him or her in a new skill or activity.

4. Be enthusiastic—but not overwhelmingly so. Your enthusiasm and positive response to new ideas can create interest on the part of your partner. However, too much of a good thing might be threatening.

5. Use natural opportunities to share what you are learning. When your partner asks a question about the information, or when something relevant occurs in a movie or television show you are watching together, take time out for discussion.

In addition.....

Note that this program is not the same as counseling. *Couple Talk* provides a process for making a good relationship better. If you find your marriage or partnership in serious trouble, you are advised to seek counseling or therapy to restore the foundation of your relationship. It is never too late to make constructive changes in a partnership—as long as love, commitment, and the motivation to work things out are present.

If you decide to see a professional counselor or marriage and family therapist, here are some suggestions to consider:

- Shop around. Ask people you trust to help

you locate a counselor or therapist. You might ask friends, relatives, clergy, physicians or mental health personnel.

- Look for the most qualified professional you can find. Check out the person's professional training and experience.
- Interview prospective therapists to determine how well they can meet your needs. For example, how flexible are their hours? How much do they charge? What about insurance claims? Will they see you individually as well as together? How will the number of sessions be determined? How is progress evaluated?
- Look for a professional whose personality and values are compatible with your own. This is usually determined through conversation, and it may take time. Once you have selected a person, you may decide that it is not a good fit. If so, don't just quit—shop around again. The present therapist might recommend someone who could work with your situation better.
- If abuse occurs in your relationship, the abusive partner should be encouraged to seek professional anger counseling. Couple counseling is not recommended at this time, especially if abuse will increase after personal issues are revealed during counseling. The abused partner may need to contact a local crisis center when personal safety is a primary issue. If the treatment of violence ceases, consult with a therapist to determine if individual or couple counseling is recommended.

TABLE of CONTENTS

HOW to FIGHT RIGHT	5-6
LEARNING to LISTEN	7-8
EXPRESSING YOURSELF	9-10
MANAGING EXPECTATIONS....	11-12
THE BALANCING ACT	13-14
BEST FRIENDS	15-16
SURVEY EVALUATIONS	17-20

Note: These lessons and activity cards are also recorded on an audiotape. Some persons may find that it is easier or more convenient to listen to the information rather than read it. If so, please contact your county extension office for a copy of the taped version.



Lesson ONE

HOW to FIGHT RIGHT



You may think that the perfect couple never has conflict. First of all, that is impossible. Secondly, healthy conflict and disagreement are crucial to a long-term marriage or relationship.

It may sound crazy, but Dr. John Gottman, a University of Washington marriage counselor and researcher, says that arguments and disputes do not have to drive couples apart—it is *how* you argue that makes the difference. Remember that extraordinary skills are not needed to settle conflicts that make both partners feel good.

Styles

Some couples may yell at each other when they have a disagreement. Other couples may avoid confrontations as much as possible. There are also couples who seem to have a keen ability to listen and understand each other—even in conflict.

According to Dr. Gottman, couples using these three styles of communication (yelling, avoiding or listening) all have equal chances of staying together. How could that be? It seems impossible that both the “yellers” and the “avoiders” could have stable relationships, yet all three types of couples have several things in common.

- They stop fights before the conflicts escalate out of control.
- They do not completely avoid dealing with a tough problem before it gets out of hand.
- They continue to respect each other despite troublesome issues.

Limited Escalation

When couples fight, they know when to stop, when to soften their voices, and when to change the course of the argument. Neither partner gets into a pattern of saying

nasty things about the other partner that he or she later regrets. They may complain about an issue, but they do not engage in character insults intended to psychologically abuse each other. The couple stops the process of negatively responding back and forth before hurtful things are said.

One group of researchers discovered that out-of-control arguments resulted in partners saying things that threatened “the very lifeblood of their marriage.” The nasty remarks may not even truly reveal how they feel, but they are trying to hurt each other in a moment of intense emotion. This may come in the form of hostile name-calling, put-downs, hostile humor, mockery, or any other type of demeaning behavior.

How can escalation be short-circuited? One of the partners must choose to back off by changing his or her tone of voice and saying something to break the negative cycle. The partner may start a sentence with “I feel....,” not “You are....”

This sudden change of behavior is powerful. It acknowledges personal feelings and opens the door to hearing the other partner’s point of view. This approach can often break the tension.

No Hide and Seek

Some couples may avoid dealing with certain troublesome issues. This is their style and they both feel comfortable with it. In other couple relationships, if one partner often brings up issues and the other partner withdraws or avoids the situation, there is trouble. The more one partner pursues, the more the other partner withdraws. In turn, the “pursuer” pushes harder and the “withdrawer” may leave or become quiet, or easily agree to stop the conversation.





Studies have shown that although “withdrawers” may not be involved verbally, their internal body reactions show increased pulse rates when troublesome issues surface. They are engaged on a non-verbal level.

How do you combat a hide-and-seek pattern? A couple needs to recognize that the actions of one partner impacts the actions of the other. They need to recognize their interdependency and think about more constructive approaches. The “withdrawer” could ask for time to think, but agrees to a specific time to talk about the issue later. The “pursuer” takes the hint and backs off.

Respect

Successful couples disagree, but they still respect each other. If a concern is raised, one partner may disagree, but will still respect the concern and listen to the other partner’s point of view. Neither person immediately becomes defensive about the issue, and neither immediately denies responsibility for the problem.

Furthermore, each person does not try to read the mind of the other partner. Researchers have found that a mind-reading partner generally has more negative interpretations of the other partner’s motives than is actually true.

How do you deal with negative interpretations? It starts with your negative thoughts, and it takes hard work to question these inner thoughts. Ask yourself the following questions: Am I being too hard on my partner? Am I being unfair when I don’t really know what my partner is thinking? What are my reasons for continuing this negative mind-reading?

Think about your answers to these questions, and begin a deliberate process to think more positively. Stop yourself when you begin to focus only on negative things about your partner.

Willingness to Change

Negative verbal and non-verbal patterns are hard on relationships. They can lead to feelings of frustrated loneliness and isolation, as real intimacy and a sense of connection fade away. But there is hope. A couple can change these damaging patterns by taking the time and effort to explore new ways of interacting. If you are working on this course without your partner’s participation, remember that positive changes can occur when only one partner works on responding differently. This change can help trigger changes in the other partner’s reactions.

It is impossible to not communicate. It is regular everyday conversation that sets the emotional climate between two persons. Communication involves not only the actual words that are spoken, but how the message is said, when it is said, and what the speaker is doing as the message is spoken. Non-verbal messages such as vocal tone, pitch and loudness, facial expressions and body movements are also important to communication.



Lesson TWO

LEARNING to LISTEN



Communication with your partner involves talking, but listening is equally important. *Listening* is more than just *hearing*. While “hearing” is the process of transmitting sound waves to the brain, “listening” is a complex procedure of interpreting and understanding what is actually heard.

Active Listening

Active listening is one of the best ways to express interest and care for another person. You have to be willing to listen to your partner’s point of view and try to understand it.

However, that does not mean you have to agree. It just means that you have to try hard to understand and identify with your mate’s feelings. It may be as simple as saying, “Yes,” or “I see,” or nodding your head. Notice the mouth and eyebrows of your partner. What message is being sent through facial expressions?

Think about your own body language. What message are you sending? Are you fidgeting? Are you rolling your eyes? Smiling sarcastically? Are you sending a message that you are truly listening to the reasons being given by your mate?

You may not like what your partner has to say, but to actively listen, you as the listener must try to understand what the speaker is saying. Next, repeat back to the speaker your understanding of what was said to see if you interpreted correctly. This is called *paraphrasing*.

The listener does not attempt to change or add to the meaning of the message. The speaker is given the first opportunity to speak freely, and the focus should remain on

the content of his or her message. The listener does not voice an opinion at this point—sometimes this is not easy if it is an extremely difficult issue. *The key is to show the speaker that you are earnestly listening.*

If the listener has not understood the speaker’s meaning, the speaker can explain further. The listener again reflects back, (paraphrases) what the speaker said, and repeats the process until the message sent is the message received.

When these two messages agree, the roles are reversed. The speaker becomes the listener, and the listener becomes the speaker.

An effective paraphrase...

- is brief.
- reflects only the most important parts of the speaker’s message.
- focuses on the content of the message.
- does not challenge the speaker’s message.

EXAMPLES

Read the following examples to understand the difference between “hearing without listening” and “active listening.”

Hearing Without Listening

Wife: “I sure am tired tonight.”

Husband: “You can rest tomorrow since it is Saturday.”

Wife: “It would be nice to rest tonight.”

Husband: “After we get home from the movie you can rest.”

The husband is not listening to what his wife was saying. He was not trying to understand what his wife really meant.





Active Listening

Wife: "I sure am tired tonight."

Husband: "Sounds like you would rather stay home than go out tonight."

Wife: "Yes, that is right. Do you mind?"

Husband: "No. That is fine with me. How about renting a movie and watching it at home?"

The husband repeated the message back to his wife to make sure he understood what she was really saying before responding. This type of communication enriches a relationship. Both partners understand each other and believe that what they are saying is being understood. In other words, the message being sent is the message being received.

Unfortunately, this communication style is not normal in everyday conversation. Active listening skills are most importantly used when difficult issues must be dealt with. These skills provide the involved parties a safer way to communicate.

- Listener will paraphrase and repeat the paraphrasing until the message is the same as what the speaker intended.
- Listener will focus on the speaker's message.
- Listener will not interrupt.
- Listener will not offer his or her own opinion or thoughts at this time.
- Both partners will get a chance to be the speaker and the listener.

Using these communication skills shows a commitment to the relationship. You are giving the unspoken message to each other that you care about the quality of your interaction. Now it is time to practice!

Ground Rules

Couples often find that a predictable structure for communicating is very helpful when there is a disagreement. It might be beneficial to establish a set of ground rules (which are agreeable to both partners) before the discussion has gone too far.

For example:

- Speaker will give genuine thoughts, feelings and concerns.
- Speaker will use "I...." statements, not "You....." statements.
- Speaker will state short messages and then allow the listener to paraphrase.



Lesson THREE

EXPRESSING YOURSELF



Most of the time when we want to let someone know how we feel, we send a “you” message. “You make me angry,” “Why don’t you ever talk to me?” and “You hurt me,” are all examples of “you” messages.

“You” messages are usually interpreted as put-downs by the other partner. All the responsibility for past and future behavior is put on the other person. Put-downs invite other put-downs.

For example:

First partner: “Why don’t you ever stay home?”

Second partner: “Why don’t you ever shut up?”

When “you” is the beginning of a negative statement, it is generally perceived as an accusation or an attack. When we feel blamed, accused or attacked we will usually do two things: defend ourselves and then counterattack. This negative cycle can go on and on until very hurtful things are said.

The “I” Statements

Using “I” statements helps during moments of tension. You acknowledge your feelings, you own them, and you take responsibility for them. There are not any put-downs, arguments are avoided, and issues can be dealt with more calmly.

“I am angry.”

“I am disappointed.”

“I feel good about that.”

Good “I” messages have three elements:

- A feeling.
- A situation or behavior.
- A need or a consequence.

A good standard model for sending “I” messages is:

“I feel _____ when (or if) _____ because I need _____.”

For example:

“I get angry when you are home all day on Friday while I am at work and you do not do the laundry. Then we have to do it during the weekend.”

In the above example, the feeling was angry, the situation was laundry not being done, and the consequence was doing it during the weekend and being resentful about it.

“I” statements are more effective when they start with feeling words. If you can substitute the words “I think” for the words “I feel” in a sentence, and it still makes sense, then you probably have expressed a thought and not a feeling.

Feeling Words

Positive

GLAD—TINGLY—GOOD—LOVING
WARM—HAPPY—INSPIRED
JUBILANT—ECSTATIC—SENSUOUS

Negative

SPITEFUL—HURT—REJECTED—SAD
IRKED—COLD—DISTANT—JEALOUS
CRUMMY—SCARED—MAD—ANGRY

“I” messages are useful for effective complaining. They help to avoid character insults and the escalation of an argument. Remember to be brief when bringing up an issue—do not go on and on. Give your partner an opportunity to paraphrase. Also, make sure the issue is worth discussing and that it is the right time to talk about it.





Validation

“I” statements work well for voicing complaints. They are also extremely useful in recognizing positive things about your relationship. However, if the two of you are constantly thinking negatively of the other, it will be tough to respond in positive ways to each other—to validate each other.

You need to remind yourself of what is right in your relationship. You need to recall the good times. You need to think of the things that your partner does well. These types of positive inner thoughts set the stage for not being so defensive in a conflict. But being positive is hard work. It is much easier to find what is wrong. Stop yourself when you begin to think bad thoughts.

Begin to share these positive thoughts. Everyone appreciates a sincere compliment or a thank you from time to time. For example, a partner could say, *“I feel all warm inside when you hug me because I need to be reminded of your love.”*

This statement includes a feeling (feel all warm inside), a behavior (when you hug me) and a consequence (I need to be reminded of your love).

Validating messages can also be simple and brief. Try a quick and sincere, *“Thank you!”*

Messages that nurture a relationship can be unspoken as well. A smile when your partner says something that pleases you might be enough. At first, your mate may be shocked at these validating messages. You may even encounter some sarcasm if normally the two of you are negative to each other most of the time. Do not give up. You might be surprised to see (or hear) your partner beginning to do the same!

Gender and Cultural Differences

As you are thinking about communication, it is helpful to remember that each person has a unique style of expression. We begin to learn ways to communicate at a very early age. Girls are reinforced when they share feelings; boys are reinforced for not sharing feelings. What happens in adulthood?

Researchers have found that women connect intimacy to verbal communication. They use talking as a way of connecting to others. For men, intimacy does not mean talking as much as sharing activities. Men more often use verbal communication to define their status or position in their environment outside the home. That is one of the reasons why some studies have shown that women speak more frequently in private settings, while men talk more in public settings.

Cultural backgrounds may also make a difference in the communication style. Someone may be taught as a young child to not look into the eyes of others as a sign of respect. Another may be taught which types of communication are appropriate to share and which are not. Raising your voice, addressing issues indirectly, and interrupting others may also stem from cultural differences.

As a couple, understanding these types of distinctions helps define a style of communication that is comfortable for both of you.



Lesson FOUR

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS



Couples expect a great deal from each other. Most people expect their partner to be a source of emotional support, economic support or assistance, companionship and sexual satisfaction. That is a big order. When expectations are not met as a person expects, disappointment, discouragement, and finally, disillusionment can occur. At this point, a marriage may begin to crumble.

The expectations might include small everyday happenings like who changes the light bulbs or who gets up first in the morning. If these types of minor events cause disputes, this may signify much larger and more subtle conflicting issues.

No couple can escape the impact of expectations. They affect everything and have a big influence on the level of satisfaction each partner has with the relationship.

Sex, Housework and Money

These are big issues for couples. For instance, one partner may think that having sex once a week is enough—the other partner may think that once a day is hardly enough. The woman may have a different expectation for intimacy than the man. Who does the laundry? Who does the cooking? Housekeeping issues have become more common, especially when both partners work outside the home. How are money decisions made? How is the family income generated?

A partner walks into a relationship with preconceived notions about these three big issues. Countless other things may cause conflict, but definite expectations about sex, housework and money make them among the most troublesome problems. One partner may think that the other partner's

specific concern is trivial. To the other partner, it is major. One partner may feel that the other is sending a message of disrespect when the problem is not taken seriously. Communication skills are required to determine the difference in expectations that each partner brings to the relationship.

More Subtle Issues

Hidden expectations might signify how power is shared, or determine the level of commitment each person should give to the relationship. It may be a small event, like who makes the coffee in the morning, but it can escalate into horrible arguments related to issues of power and caring. Forgiveness and trust are often unspoken, sensitive issues.

How can a couple recognize touchy issues that are driven by differences in expectations? Here are four warning signs:

- One or both of you keep score.
- You both want to avoid the issue.
- Trivial issues blow up.
- You talk about the same thing repeatedly, and never grapple with the hidden issue.

Where Do These Expectations Come From?

Expectations about small and big issues build from many sources. The family of origin gives us many expectations. For instance, some families are not openly affectionate to each other—other families consider hugging and kissing very normal. Gender roles might be well defined in some families—in other families it might be more flexible. One family may think that only the woman should do the housekeeping—in another family it is a shared responsibility. The family's ethnic and racial background also helps dictate expectations.





Experiences from past intimate relationships affect the expectations of a couple. A partner may have a hard time trusting a new mate based on the infidelity of a former spouse. Even how to kiss carries expectations.

A person's belief system or sense of spirituality affects expectations. It may be more difficult for a couple to develop a shared worldview if their core belief systems are different.

Culture also influences expectations. Television, movies, newspapers and magazines give us powerful messages of what to expect in marriage and intimate relationships. Male and female interrelationships have been evolving, yet cultural messages often reflect unchanging role expectations for women and men.

Use of Communication Skills

"I" messages provide an avenue for sharing expectations, especially those which cause conflict. Think about the "I" message formula: feeling, behavior and consequence. *"I feel so good when you rub my back because it shows me that you really care about me."*

Listening skills are equally important as couples share expectations. The person giving the "I" message needs to stop and give the other partner a chance to rephrase the message. When the message is correctly received, switch roles.

Keys to Handling Expectations

KEY NUMBER ONE

Be aware of what you expect. Many expectations are unconscious. They function automatically. Perhaps a partner assumes that there would never be an issue over who should cook or who should take care of the car. When a conflict occurs, think about your expectation.

KEY NUMBER TWO

Be reasonable in what you expect. A partner who expects the new spouse to drop all previous friendships is unreasonable. Unrealistic expectations are likely to lead to conflict. They can also be very detrimental to the relationship over time if a partner refuses to change an unreasonable expectation.

KEY NUMBER THREE

Be clear about what you expect. Perhaps you want to spend your birthday without other people around. Have you indicated this expectation to your partner? Have you used the appropriate time and place to express this expectation? In the midst of a heated argument is not the time to voice your expectation and expect your partner to embrace it.

Markman, Howard, Scott Stanley and Susan Blumberg (1994). *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Lesson FIVE

THE BALANCING ACT



Do you ever feel like there are not enough hours in the day? This is a common problem for many couples. Work, family activities, personal interests and community responsibilities keep people busy. You may ask yourself, *“When can we make time to concentrate on our relationship with each other?”*

It might be easier than you think.

Personal Needs

A person cannot easily nurture a loved partner in day-to-day life unless he or she has high self-regard and self-acceptance. Just as we question the time we have for nurturing a relationship, we question the time and energy we have for privacy and self-renewal. But it is important! This is particularly true for people confronted with multiple roles and responsibilities: wife, husband, father, mother, daughter, son, volunteer, homemaker, employee, etc.

Each person needs to make time to engage in an activity that is esteem-building and energy-restoring on a regular basis. It may be as simple as getting up 15 minutes earlier each morning to have time to yourself to do whatever you want.

It is important for each of us as individuals to care for ourselves. This helps us develop to our fullest potential. If we fail to do this, and fail to hold ourselves in the highest regard, we become boring, closed, dull and monotonous. We can also become defensive whenever we interact with others—always trying to defend ourselves instead of taking responsibility for our actions. If we fail to take care of ourselves, it is hard to be able to have a dynamic relationship with those around us, especially with our spouse or partner.

Time for “Us”

Even though family and work demands often interfere with “couple time,” you still need to find time alone to spend together. You may feel as though you are betraying other family members or friends by sharing your time and affection with your partner. Or, you may think that you do not have enough money to do anything special, but it is an important part of the balancing act to make the time for yourselves.

It may take some creativity, but it is worth the effort. Spend time together taking walks, doing volunteer work, or attending a community event that you both enjoy. If you have children in your home, trading child care with other couples could be a solution to not paying for a babysitter.

On a daily basis, couples who find at least 15 minutes together to share what is on their minds are building bridges to strong relationships. It may be as simple as shutting off the TV and giving each other your undivided attention.

Cycles

You and your partner will have several “marriages” during your lifetime together. That is, your relationship will go through stages. Each stage will have its own rewards, but it will also call for adjustments in the relationship.

Numerous studies have found that marital satisfaction tends to decline with the birth of the first child. And, this satisfaction generally does not begin to increase until the last child leaves home. Stepfamily couples may experience an even longer delay. When two households are combined, they may have even more years of childrearing.





As for childless couples, they appear to have higher levels of satisfaction over time than do couples with children. However, it also makes a difference if the childlessness was by fate or by choice.

Other factors, particularly jobs or careers, can have similar effects on childless couples and couples with children. If focusing on the relationship has taken low priority over other things, strengthening the partnership bond may take a serious effort.

Problem-Solving

As you juggle the many daily demands that you and your partner have, you may realize that a specific problem exists. Yet, you never take the time to address it as a team. It gnaws away at your relationship and takes time away from more relationship-building activities. For example, you may disagree on how often you should be in contact with other family members.

During problem-solving discussions, often times people like to go straight to thinking about solutions. But, that is too fast—effective problem-solving does not move quickly. It starts with *discussing* the problem even before thinking about solutions.

Each person needs to use listening skills and “I” statements until both agree that the problem has been fully discussed. If it is a large problem, like setting boundaries with your in-laws, you may need to break the problem into parts. You may want to start with holiday and birthday celebrations. Work through that problem before you tackle daily visits with family.

After the problem has been completely discussed, make sure each person

understands what is trying to be solved and what accomplishments need to be made. For example, are you trying to find a way to celebrate holidays with your extended family, yet also celebrate by yourselves?

Now you are ready to brainstorm solutions. Remember to be creative and do not evaluate each idea. Propose many suggestions and try having fun if you can.

Now it is time to come to an agreement. This will most likely take a compromise, with neither partner getting exactly what was desired. Finally, set a specific time in the future to discuss how everything is working out. Small changes may need to be made to make things work better.

A healthy partnership is all about teamwork.



Lesson SIX

BEST FRIENDS



A friend is someone that you can be comfortable with, open up to, have fun with, and can count on. Having a friend is often listed by couples as the single most important goal in their relationship. What happens when couples start out as friends, but find that friendship disappearing?

Stumbling Blocks

Being too busy may be a factor, but it is more likely that constant conflict erodes a friendship. When you have an argument, it may take some time before you feel like being friends again. If you give yourselves a chance to have time together, a fight can quickly spoil the event. It is especially damaging when a partner takes personal information shared during earlier tender moments and uses it as a verbal weapon.

Couples who have been together for a long time may think there is no need to share thoughts with each other. You may think that you know each other so well that nothing will be new to your partner.

Keep in mind that we change constantly. Something you saw on the news might affect you differently today than it did yesterday. How does your partner know that unless you share it?

Strengthening Your Friendship

Making time to talk as friends is important. Set some ground rules for these occasions if you need to, such as not allowing yourselves to talk about problems. Get away from the telephone and other potential interruptions and talk only about things that interest you. Above all else, use your listening skills to strengthen the sharing between the two of you.

Create fun in your relationship.

This is not an easy task if playfulness has been absent for a long time. Having fun is a skill, and partners need to share fantasies, private jokes, plans and dreams. Brainstorm ways you can have fun. From time to time, you might want to reach out to a network of friends to do things together.

Compliments to each other can also help boring or strained relationships become more enjoyable.

"I appreciate you talking to my nieces and nephews when they come to visit."

"You clean the bathroom really well."

Talk about things that will make both of you laugh. One note of caution, however, practical jokes can backfire. Your partner may not view humor as you do.

Think about your sex life. Tension can spoil lovemaking, so try to protect those times from conflict. Researchers report that couples who communicate both verbally and nonverbally about their desires have the best sexual relationships. These couples view themselves as a team—giving and receiving in ways that are important to both.

Commitment

Commitment is the glue that holds couples together. Commitment can be defined in many ways: "hanging in there," trust, devotion, sacrifice, follow-through, love, fidelity, etc. Most couples will have regrets about their relationship at some time in their lives, and may even think about separating. But, partners who sincerely like and respect each other can move beyond those moments. They think of themselves as a team, and are fairly open at sharing what they want out of life and their relationship. They work at problem-solving.





Some couples stay together regardless of their satisfaction with their relationship. They may not be happy, but they choose to stick it out. It may be for moral reasons, “divorce is wrong,” or for the children. In these instances, couples can improve their relationship if they commit themselves, but it will be hard work. These couples may believe their fate is a lifetime of unhappiness, without realizing that change is possible with time and attention to the relationship.

In the United States, couples who chose to live together without the bond of marriage increased by 131 percent between 1980 to 1994. Researchers have found that the level of commitment in non-married couples is generally lower than married couples. Even if they eventually marry, the commitment to the relationship and mutual satisfaction remains lower.

Regardless of your situation, you may be asking yourself, “How can we work on commitment?”

Couple commitment occurs with constraint and dedication. Constraint stabilizes the relationship. It means stopping to think before doing something that might really harm your relationship. Dedication is making the relationship grow. Learning individually or together as a couple can reinforce your relationship-building. Being mentored by a more experienced couple that has a successful relationship can be helpful.

A good relationship means sacrificing for your partner, working out your differences, and enjoying each other.

It means working as a team.

It is a matter of will.

References

- Anderson, S., and R. Sabatelli. *Family Interaction: A Multigenerational Developmental Perspective*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995.
- Beckham, K. “Choice, Not Chance: Enhancing Your Marital Relationship.” Manhattan, KS: K-State Research and Extension, 1989.
- Eshelman, J. *The Family*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1997.
- Gottman, J. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Markman, H., S. Stanley and S. Blumberg. *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.
- Notarius, C., and H. Markman *We Can Work it Out: Making Sense of Marital Conflict*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993.
- Olsen, C. “Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies: Building a Strong Couple Relationship.” Manhattan, KS: K-State Research and Extension, 1996.
- Tannen, D. *That's Not What I Meant: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986.
- Tannen, D. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1990.

Special thanks to:

Thanks to the following persons who reviewed all or parts of the *Couple Talk* information: Anna Mae Brown, Carol Fink, Kathy Goodin, Elaine Johannes, Emily Mark, Pam Martinez, John Murray, Trudy Rice and Candyce Russell, Kansas State University; and Benjamin Silliman III, University of Wyoming.

Thanks to Paula Seele and Carmen Sherwood for layout and editorial assistance and graphic design.

Lessons and evaluation written by:

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist,
Family Systems. School of Family Studies and
Human Services.

Activity cards written by:

Trudy Rice
Family and Consumer Sciences County
Extension Agent, Douglas County.



Survey EVALUATION

COUPLE TALK



When you have finished the six lessons and activities, please take a few moments to complete the survey below. We are interested in knowing if this information has been helpful to you. Thank you for completing this survey—your comments will be kept confidential.

Directions: If both you and your partner completed this course, please complete individual surveys (an identical survey is on Page 19). Please return the survey(s) to the address listed at the bottom of the page.

1. I am a: ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Education I have completed: ☐ High School / GED ☐ Technical School
 ☐ Some College ☐ Bachelor's Degree ☐ Some Graduate Work
 ☐ Graduate Degree ☐ Other: _____
3. My partner and I are: ☐ Married ☐ Not Married
4. How long have you been in this relationship? _____
5. What do you think is the most valuable fact, idea or suggestion learned from these lessons and activities?
6. How do you plan to use this knowledge in your couple relationship? For example, you will stop fighting with your partner before it gets out of hand, you will listen better to your partner, etc.
7. What is the major issue that usually causes conflict between you and your partner?
8. Will the *Couple Talk* information help you and your partner deal with this issue?
 ☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments:

9. What other comments do you have about *Couple Talk*? Feel free to write on the back of this evaluation form.

10. Please rate your satisfaction with this program: 1 2 3 4 5
 1-Not Satisfied 2-Somewhat Satisfied 3-Satisfied 4-Very Satisfied 5-Extremely Satisfied

Please return this evaluation form to: Charlotte Shoup Olsen, School of Family Studies and Human Services, K-State Research and Extension, 343 Justin Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. **Thank You!**





ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Survey EVALUATION

COUPLE TALK



When you have finished the six lessons and activities, please take a few moments to complete the survey below. We are interested in knowing if this information has been helpful to you. Thank you for completing this survey—your comments will be kept confidential.

Directions: If both you and your partner completed this course, please complete individual surveys (an identical survey is on Page 17). Please return the survey(s) to the address listed at the bottom of the page.

1. I am a: ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Education I have completed: ☐ High School / GED ☐ Technical School
☐ Some College ☐ Bachelor's Degree ☐ Some Graduate Work
☐ Graduate Degree ☐ Other: _____
3. My partner and I are: ☐ Married ☐ Not Married
4. How long have you been in this relationship? _____
5. What do you think is the most valuable fact, idea or suggestion learned from these lessons and activities?
6. How do you plan to use this knowledge in your couple relationship? For example, you will stop fighting with your partner before it gets out of hand, you will listen better to your partner, etc.
7. What is the major issue that usually causes conflict between you and your partner?
8. Will the *Couple Talk* information help you and your partner deal with this issue?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments:

9. What other comments do you have about *Couple Talk*? Feel free to write on the back of this evaluation form.

10. Please rate your satisfaction with this program: 1 2 3 4 5
1-Not Satisfied 2-Somewhat Satisfied 3-Satisfied 4-Very Satisfied 5-Extremely Satisfied

Please return this evaluation form to: Charlotte Shoup Olsen, School of Family Studies and Human Services, K-State Research and Extension, 343 Justin Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. Thank You!





ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

[illegible]

This and other publications from Kansas State University are available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.oznet.ksu.edu>

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights are reserved. In each case, credit Charlotte Shoup Olsen, "Couple Talk: Enhancing Your Relationship," Kansas State University, January 1997.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, Kansas

MF-2297

January 1997

It is the policy of Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service that all persons shall have equal opportunity and access to its educational programs, services, activities, and materials without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, or disability. Kansas State University is an equal opportunity organization. These material may be available in alternative formats.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Marc A. Johnson, Director.

File Code: Human Development and Family Relations—3

CS1/98—5M