

# **COUPLE RESCUE SKILL-BUILDER**

*Communication Skills for  
Restoring and Maintaining  
Togetherness*

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE NEED FOR COUPLE RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

So often in couple relationships, both partners find themselves yearning for the satisfying togetherness they once enjoyed. The couple's initial mutual delight has become eclipsed by problematic patterns of interacting that feed a growing dissatisfaction.

A very common cause of couples getting stuck in dissatisfaction is differing needs and expectations of each other in the area of emotional closeness. Is that *your* dilemma? Maybe one of you yearns for a type of connection that is not forthcoming...and the other one may be at a loss to understand what's missing; or one of you is making every effort as well as he or she knows how to do, and feels that it's just not being seen or acknowledged by the other one. Life experiences with closeness and emotional intimacy vary dramatically, starting from our very beginnings. And while there is no "right" or "wrong" about how to be close to another person, there are indeed some fundamental skills that can help partners become more closely aligned in giving and receiving and encouraging emotional intimacy.

This short but powerful "how to" handbook is designed especially for those partners who are less accustomed to emotional closeness. A relationship's difficulties arise, as a rule, not from *one* partner being solely responsible, but rather from the contributions of *both* partners. Nonetheless, we have observed over many years of professional and personal experience that partners who initially feel uncomfortable with emotional intimacy can use the simple skills described in this

book to discover the importance and the value of the emotional side of relationship. And those who are already at home with emotional closeness can further hone their skills.

As you become familiar with these specific skills, you may well find ways to work on this not just on your own, but together, in partnership. A whole cascade of welcome ripple effects could develop and enhance satisfaction in your couple relationship. Ideally, both partners will make use of this handbook.

In this skill-builder, we share with you the most important immediate steps *you* can take to hone simple but often neglected communication and listening skills that can rescue an increasingly troubled couple relationship. For a relationship to end due to the absence of these basic skills is like drowning in ankle-deep water—so easily avoidable by the right moves. They are not hard to make if you know what they are. And we predict you will be pleasantly surprised by what you'll find in the rewarding world of emotional communication.

Does any of the following sound or feel familiar? Have you heard these things from your partner or said them to your partner? These are the types of distress signals typically voiced by a partner who wants more emotional intimacy and connection:

- You're not listening to me. I'm talking about my *feelings*. You don't even seem to *notice* my feelings.
- You never talk about your *own* feelings, either, and that leaves me feeling disconnected and totally in the dark about what's really going on inside you. It feels as if you're dealing with your own stuff alone or—even ignoring your own issues entirely.
- When we disagree, you don't know how to communicate or discuss things constructively.
- In sex, you don't get my cues about what works for me and what doesn't.
- You don't seem to understand that before I can have any desire for sexual intimacy with you, I need to feel we're in good emotional connection. For me, our *whole relationship* is foreplay. But you seem to need the physical part first in order to get to the emotional part. So we're in a continual catch-22 about that.
- You make decisions about things that affect both of us without involving me in the decision-making process.
- You aren't involved enough in everyday family life; it doesn't feel like teamwork. We're together but separate; and I feel alone in all of this.
- You think you know all the answers—and you give them, even when I'm not asking for answers or advice.

The partner who is on the receiving end of those complaints—and who may be less accustomed to emotional intimacy and connection—is usually baffled by them and might reply in some of the following ways. Do any of these sound or feel familiar?

- I feel responsible for making you happy, but I have no idea how to do that. I don't see how I'll *ever* understand you.
- I don't feel appreciated; I'm never good enough. All you do is criticize me—even though I'm trying so hard. You don't seem to value all that I'm *already* doing, fixing, and providing.
- You drag out old disagreements that we've gone over and over and over. I've explained and apologized, but you won't let me forget about it.
- You're not willing to have sex often enough, and you don't get how urgently I want and need it—not just physically but also to feel connected and desired.
- You're not romantic with me anymore. I'm confused and disappointed.
- Things have gotten serious and problematic. It's not as much fun as before, and I don't understand what's gone wrong and why you're so dissatisfied.
- I feel togetherness just from both of us being home, but that's not good enough for you.
- The kids and your parents and even the pets are more important to you than I am.
- You blame me for not making time to talk, but how can we possibly have a conversation when the kids are constantly needing attention...or work demands are relentless...or it's late at night when I'm exhausted and can't possibly give you my full attention?

If any of the dilemmas above have been cropping up in your relationship, this “how to” handbook is for you.

Don’t be fooled by the simple appearance of this little book! It’s a unique distillation of powerful knowledge of how emotional connection and emotional communication work—knowledge that can readily be used to create enriching, mid-course adjustments in your couple relationship.

When you are ready to begin trying out and acquiring the skills described in this handbook—perhaps after reading through all of the skills—we suggest focusing on one skill at a time, digesting it thoroughly and moving on to other skills at your own pace.

Every step you take is a step in the right direction. New skills tend to feel stilted at first, but they become natural with ongoing use. What’s most important is that you’re making that effort. And this is not about changing who you are; it’s about developing additional skills.

As your familiarity with these skills develops, you will begin to see and appreciate the deep emotional logic inherent in how people act, feel, and think. Does “emotional logic” sound like a contradiction in terms? You’ll see that it is not a contradiction at all.

Our emotional system is coherent—meaning that it has an underlying intelligence and logic. As you begin to see into that logic, your partner’s emotions and behavior will cease to be a mystery—and so will your own!



### *A note about pronouns*

The partner who wants greater emotional closeness could be a “she,” a “he,” or a person who identifies in some other way. We’ve attempted to keep our writing gender-neutral by using composite pronouns like “s/he” and “him/her” to refer to the reader’s partner. We intend that to refer to the entire spectrum of gender possibilities. At the same time, our experience with couples tells us that very often “she” is the partner seeking greater emotional intimacy and “he” is the partner who is less familiar with that way of relating. So, we use pronouns reflecting that common constellation in the couple example that threads through the handbook. We ask that you, dear reader, mentally adjust the pronouns to fit your situation, because this handbook is intended for use by *all* people and in *all* types of couple relationships.

## SKILL 1. LISTEN



**What that means:** This most fundamental ingredient for couple closeness consists of giving devoted attention—to the best of your ability—when your partner is telling you about important personal things, without distractions or multitasking, like glancing at your phone or a magazine while your partner is talking.

**Why it's important:** For your partner to feel your full, caring attention and caring understanding as you listen to him/her is the core of emotional connection. It's what communicates, "You truly matter to me." Of course, this should be a two-way process. *Each* of you has this basic need for attention and understanding from your partner, though perhaps to different

degrees or in different ways. It's a universal, fundamental human need to be *seen* and *heard*.

Quality personal attention is *the bond*—the heart and soul of connection. The feeling of closeness and connection is a major source of security, trust, warmth, joy, enrichment, and intimacy in a relationship.

**How to do it:** Make eye contact and listen with your full attention, with the active intention of just hearing and taking in what your partner is saying and what it means to him/her, without necessarily being able to make full sense of it yet. At this stage, listening silently is fine.

In the box below is an example illustrating this skill—and the couple depicted will thread through all of the other skills as well. Here we're seeing this couple as they dive into a tense but not unusual interaction between partners.

It's Saturday morning, Alex is at the breakfast table reading his newspaper, and his partner Chris announces to him, "There's something I have to say. You're just not pulling your weight with the kids and the household, and I'm pretty upset about it."

In response, Alex looks right at Chris so she knows that he's connecting with her and willing to hear about something that's clearly important to her, even though it's uncomfortable for him.

**What might need extra attention:** In the example just above, you might sense immediately how tempting or automatic it can feel to react in some way *other than* simply listening. You may not feel able to listen in this way for one reason or another—as, for instance, when you’re feeling defensive, or discouraged, or just plain overtired. That happens sometimes, of course, and we will guide you in skills 10 and 12 below in working through that situation when it occurs. Let’s assume for the moment, though, that you *are* able to listen attentively.

## SKILL 2. LISTEN AND ACKNOWLEDGE

...and it really bothers me that...



Oh...I didn't realize you felt this way.



**What that means:** This is about letting your partner know that you are actually “letting in” and *registering* what s/he is telling you.

**Why it's important:** In order to feel connected with you, your partner needs to know you're taking in and considering what s/he's saying, not just hearing the sound of his/her voice and not just waiting for the interaction to end.

**How to do it:** Periodically offer simple verbal and nonverbal acknowledgments in whatever way comes naturally to you as an expression of actively paying attention, such as saying “I see” or nodding while making eye contact.

As Chris begins to offer more detail about all that's resting on her shoulders, Alex begins to acknowledge what Chris is telling him by saying, "Oh...I see...I didn't realize you felt this way."

**What might need extra attention:** As you're fully letting in your partner's message, it's likely you'll begin having your own reactions. That's normal and natural, of course. What's important here is to realize consciously that you *are* having your own reactions—which, at times, may even feel intense—and to ask yourself whether you're able to hold your reactions for later and first dedicate yourself, for the moment at least, to making sure *s/he* feels heard. Again, we're assuming for now that you are, indeed, able to listen to and acknowledge what you're hearing from your partner. If not, skills 10 and 12 below will guide you further.

## SKILL 3. LISTEN AND REFLECT BACK



**What that means:** Simply check in with your partner as to whether you're understanding him/her accurately, by briefly but explicitly reviewing what you've heard. You're creating a feedback loop. If your understanding is off—and that can certainly happen—s/he then has the opportunity to explain in a different way.

**Why it's important:** S/he needs to know you're engaged in *understanding* what you're hearing. If you're just sitting there and silently "getting it," s/he won't necessarily feel heard. Listening silently for too long can come across as non-involvement in what s/he's telling you.

Particularly in long-term relationships it's important to avoid assuming that you already know and understand what your partner is communicating. The only way to be sure is to create this feedback loop.

**How to do it:** Briefly repeat key aspects of your partner's message *in your own words*. Take care to stay very close to what you're hearing and seeing from him/her, leaving your own interpretations, elaborations, and assumptions by the wayside as much as you can, knowing you'll get to voice your own response before long.

Statements will generally work better than questions in your quest for better understanding of your partner. Questions have a way of making people feel they need to come up with good answers—which they often don't have. Try saying things like "What I think I'm understanding from you is..." or "It sounds as if you mean..." or "I'd love to understand more about...." Formulations of that sort contain the implicit question "Am I getting it right?" which invites—but doesn't demand—further clarification from him/her.

*Making the effort* to understand is the lion's share of showing your partner that you truly care about him/her and therefore are genuinely interested in what s/he's saying to you.



Chris tells Alex, "I feel left alone with the responsibilities of caring for the children and running the household... and it feels as though you're not really *together* with me in it."

Alex responds, "What I'm getting is that for you it's not only about sharing the effort fairly, it's also very much about feeling we're really together in it, which you *haven't* been feeling. I didn't realize that before."

**What might need extra attention:** Right at this juncture, many partners will be very tempted to defend themselves, or to explain why the *partner's* feelings are "wrong." See if you can dedicate yourself, though, to just listening and really understanding what you're hearing about what *your partner* is experiencing. Remember that *understanding* your partner *does not mean* you are *agreeing* with him/her or feeling the same way yourself. This can be very challenging at first. Most people find that it takes concerted practice, so be patient with yourself.

## SKILL 4. EMPATHIZE

I thought more about what you told me yesterday, and I get a sense that you're feeling really hurt.



Yes, I am! I was hoping you'd see that.



**What that means:** To empathize is to put yourself in the other person's shoes...to pay attention to what the other person is experiencing and, to some degree, have a vicarious sense of what your partner seems to be feeling. To *communicate* your empathy is to make it apparent to the person that you are really tuning in to what s/he is experiencing and feeling, and how s/he is understanding things.

Whereas an understanding of the *content* of your partner's communication—the actual words—is largely an intellectual endeavor, empathizing with how s/he *feels* forges an emotional connection in which you're getting a "felt sense" of his/her subjective experience. Ideally, you're operating on both of those tracks. You need to understand the *content* well enough

to be able to empathize accurately with your partner's *experience* of that content. So you focus on content at certain moments and then bring your focus back to his/her subjective experience. With practice, this alternation in focus becomes a natural ebb and flow.

**Why it's important:** Your partner needs to know you can relate to how s/he feels—or at least that you're making your best attempt to do so. *Seeing that it matters to you to understand your partner's experience is often all s/he really wants and needs in order to feel emotionally connected to you.* Yes, it's that simple! You don't have to figure out how to solve your partner's problem. In fact, solving his/her problem *won't* engender emotional connection (and we'll talk more about this later on), but empathizing will.

Maybe at times you find yourself regarding emotions as something problematic and messy—something better to avoid. For sure, the extreme emotionalism of some people can be difficult and unpleasant. That isn't representative of emotion in people's lives, however, and emotions are not inherently problematic. In fact, they are crucial for *directly experiencing* connection and life in its richness. A person's emotions exist—they're *right there*—and any attempts to ignore them or play them down will very likely backfire.

**How to do it:** As you respond and reflect back, also tell your partner what you understand s/he's *feeling* and *experiencing*—and why these things matter to him/her—right alongside the factual content that you're acknowledging.

Chris says, “It just doesn’t feel as though we’re actually *together* in life. We started this family together, but it feels more and more as though we’re just living our separate lives in parallel... kind of together in name only.”

Hearing that, Alex pays attention to the feelings Chris seems to be having. He even lets her know what’s coming across to him that she might not be saying out loud by saying, “I’m getting the idea that you’re feeling not only overworked, but actually almost abandoned... as if we went into all of this together but now you’re having to fend for yourself. Is that how it’s feeling to you?”

**What might need extra attention:** Listening, understanding, and empathizing can initially feel like a big job. When you see your partner’s happiness in feeling more connected with you, though—and his/her resulting satisfaction with *you*—you’ll feel the effort it requires of you is well worth making. Be aware, too, that s/he’ll need to see that you are fairly consistent and reliable in maintaining genuine emotional contact before s/he can really count on it to be a regular part of life together, as s/he needs it to be. Trust grows from consistency over time, so that means you need to keep at it! Don’t be discouraged if it takes time to cultivate your partner’s trust in your newly emerging capacity for emotional communication.

That night, as Alex is trying to be physically intimate with Chris, she reveals more about how she feels—feelings that have been stored up for a long time. She says, “Oh—so now you want to come around and ‘visit’ me for the fun stuff! How can you expect me to be close this way all of a sudden, when I don’t feel closeness coming from you in all the other ways that matter to me? It just doesn’t work that way for me!”

You may want to argue with your partner or prove him/her wrong—very understandably. And it can be extremely challenging for you to empathize if you’re feeling criticized or unappreciated! You’ll discover, though, as you become more skilled at listening deeply, that it is futile to argue against someone’s feelings. They are what they are. However, feelings can change as a result of new *experiences*.

For some people, being sexual may be the *very way* to feel close. If that’s how you feel, you may be puzzled if it’s not that way for your partner. For other people, a major factor governing the inclination to be sexual is the emotional closeness that comes from feeling *emotionally understood* by their partner. In that case, emotional understanding and empathy are crucial ingredients in opening the door to sexuality.

If your partner's heart, mind and body follow different patterns from yours, that doesn't mean that his/hers are wrong or in need of correction—just as your patterns of heart, mind and body are valid for you. Your desires for having satisfying sex are not wrong, and neither are the conditions that enable your partner to be receptive to being sexual. It's a matter of two people's needs being understood and responded to respectfully.

What works best as a first step, therefore, is simply to *pay attention and express recognition and acceptance of your partner's pattern just as it is*, even though that pattern may be a dilemma for you. And remember that your patterns may be a dilemma for your partner, as well.

In sex it is particularly important to hear with empathy and *remember* your partner's indications of what s/he enjoys and *doesn't* enjoy. Few missteps in couple relationship are as alienating as not heeding or even remembering your partner's indications of what doesn't feel okay sexually, and then engaging in those unwelcome behaviors yet again. Why? Because when you again do what you've already been told causes suffering, to your partner that registers emotionally as meaning that you don't truly care about him/her, and that your own pleasure matters more to you than sparing your partner from strong discomfort or even distress. To love someone means that that person's well-being is as important to you as your own well-being. To love someone means you remember what gives him/her delight and what brings suffering. Listening with empathy is how you hear those messages loud and clear.

You can't read your partner's mind—about sex or anything else—but you *can* notice and remember what s/he does mention about what s/he enjoys, wants, needs, finds interesting, or is curious about—whether it's some useful item, a book, a movie, a type of food, a new experience, or anything else. Your caring thoughtfulness in hearing, remembering and actively responding—*without* your partner asking you to do so—is one of the most powerful and beautiful ways of communicating your love and making your partner *feel* loved, far more deeply, in fact, than great sex can ever do.

## SKILL 5. INTERRUPT IF NECESSARY, BUT RESPECTFULLY

...and you really should be helping with...and then there's ...and I was also thinking about...



mm-hmm...mm-hmm...I see...mm-hmm.... I'd like to have a turn so I can reply to what you've said so far!



**What that means:** Wait until your partner has finished a sentence, paragraph, or idea before responding.

**Why it's important:** Your partner will not feel listened to, understood, or valued if you interrupt abruptly, harshly or disrespectfully. And if you interrupt midstream, you can't even *hear* what's being said—and that becomes painfully clear to him/her. The unspoken messages from you to your partner, in that case, are along these lines:



- What I have to say is more important than what you have to say.
- I'm not interested enough in what you're saying to wait until you're finished.
- I'm not responding to what you're trying to communicate to me, because I've already decided what I want to say.

**How to do it:** Make a conscious decision to train yourself to wait until there's a natural break in the flow before you respond. If your partner goes on and on without any such break, you'll have to break in, but do so as respectfully as possible.

In order to get the best quality listening for what *you* need to express, as a rule it's best to wait until your partner first feels listened to, understood, and valued. Then begin not by launching into what you wish to say, but by first saying, for example, "I'd like to say some things now. Are you able to listen?"

Chris continues to tell Alex how she often feels left to her own devices in family situations when she's wished for his help. She elaborates with examples of what she feels he should have done differently.

At this point, quite understandably, Alex would like a turn in the conversation. (He may even feel like putting an end to what he's hearing!) He waits until she briefly pauses and then says, "Listen, I'm taking in what you're telling me...and I'd like to respond to something you just said before we move on to anything else."

**What might need extra attention:** Many “listeners” are so accustomed to interrupting that they don’t even notice when they do it. And when the speaker is saying things we aren’t comfortable hearing, the tendency to interrupt can be even stronger. But if you’re interrupting, it becomes apparent that you certainly aren’t really listening, and that’s more damaging in your couple relationship than anywhere else.

We all know individuals who make it a challenge *not* to interrupt, because they keep on talking and rarely pause. If you find yourself faced with that dilemma, *transparency* can come to the rescue. If you find no other option, then cut in transparently and respectfully by saying something like this: “One second—I *know* I’m interrupting right here, but I really need to say something about this before you say more. I need a turn—can you listen to me for a moment?”

Even if you don’t have something specific you want to say, you may still start to feel that it has become too much for you to take in or digest. That alone is sufficient reason to ask your partner to pause briefly so that you can get your bearings with what you’ve heard so far. Here too, transparency is very useful. For example, “I’m listening closely but for me that’s a lot to take in and at this point I’m reaching saturation. It could all become a blur if we don’t pause here.” This is also an opportunity to reflect back what you’re hearing to make sure you’re understanding it properly.

## SKILL 6. AVOID THE PHRASE “YES, BUT...”

What's upsetting me is that I feel you're not doing your share!



Yes, but...



**What that means:** It means, quite literally, that you should studiously avoid saying “Yes, but....” And when you understand the full negative impact that phrase often has on the other person, you may not want to use it at all any more.

**Why it's important:** The phrase “Yes, but...” has the unintentional effect of trivializing and dismissing what your partner (or anyone, for that matter) has just communicated, so it can easily undo everything you've accomplished so far. By listening in a caring way—by giving your partner empathic responses or implicit signals that show how closely and caringly you're listening—you've let your partner know all of this:

- Yes, you and your concerns are important to me.
- Yes, I take you seriously and want to set aside dedicated time for us to connect.
- Yes, I want to understand you, your feelings, and what you're experiencing.
- Yes, I aim to give you the chance to clarify further, if I'm not "getting it."

In other words, you've communicated lots of feelings of "Yes, I'm with you." If all of that valuable communication is then followed by a "but..." much of the "yes" will be negated instantly, and the emotional connection you've built up will be undone.

**How to do it:** Bite your tongue when you feel the "Yes, but..." coming. Stick with the "yes" part—knowing that the "but" word would cause something of an emotional train wreck if it escapes your lips. (If you don't believe us, try it and find out for yourself!) Stop, pause, and breathe deeply until you can resist the urge to voice a "but." This can be difficult, but it's *very* important!

Your mission here is to do your best to *understand* every facet of your partner's message—verbal and non-verbal—even if you don't see things the same way or feel the same way s/he does.

Of course, *you* also need—and your partner needs to be giving you—the same quality of understanding. A healthy relationship is a two-way street. Giving the gift of understanding is what a couple relationship needs in order to thrive, and without this it withers.

That means that *whenever your partner is expressing feelings*, you refrain from using any “but” messages: no arguing, no contradicting with facts, no convincing, because no good will come of it. In response to your partner expressing feelings, just aim to give understanding, because that’s what works.

Chris has been saying things that Alex is not at all happy to be hearing. He’s feeling criticized and also doesn’t really agree with Chris that he isn’t doing enough, given how long and hard he works at his job for the family’s income. So, when she points out what he hasn’t been doing at home, he’s feeling a strong urge to defend himself and argue with her by saying, “Yes, but I’m working long hours and doing my share by earning the money for all of us. I don’t know why you’re complaining. What I do never seems to be enough. You’re always finding some way to be dissatisfied with me!”

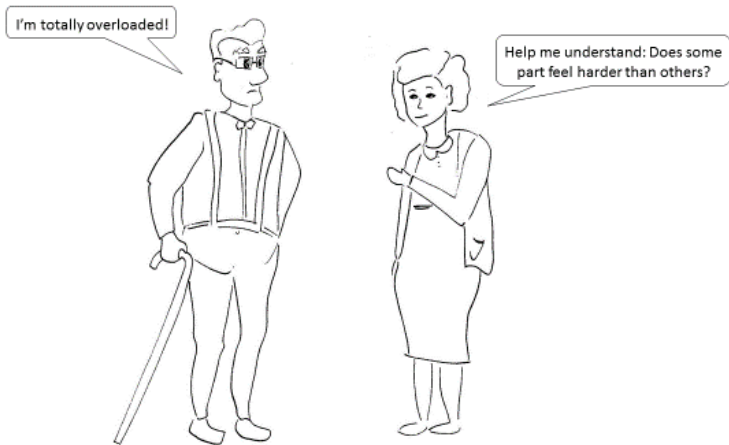
That is, of course, a perfectly natural way to want to react, and it’s something of a struggle for Alex to choose not to respond that way and to try out instead what he read in this manual: He manages to say, “Well, I see how this looks and feels to you. And I want to tell you how it looks and feels to me, soon if not now, and I hope we can understand each other enough to make this feel a lot better to you. I certainly don’t want you to be stuck in feeling so alone and unhappy with how we operate.”

**What might need extra attention:** During all these steps of listening, understanding, empathizing, and really staying with your partner emotionally, of course *you too* are having feelings and reactions. You have a natural need to express your own viewpoint and feelings to your partner.

So it requires a conscious choice—for the good of your relationship—that for right now you're a *listener*. It may not feel natural to you to continue listening while containing the response you want to make. This is actually something we're already accustomed to doing in other contexts, though, such as being in a meeting at work and having to wait for an appropriate moment to voice an objection or point out a problem in what's being planned.

You have every right to have *your* turn to express your side of things, but you'll want your partner truly available to listen—and if s/he isn't feeling heard by you yet, the listening *you* want most likely won't be forthcoming. Your own enlightened self-interest necessitates patience. Knowing you'll have your turn later makes it easier to take the listener position initially, for as long as needed to allow your partner to feel heard.

## SKILL 7. INVITE CLARIFICATION AS NEEDED



**What that means:** There will be times when you *don't* yet understand what your partner is communicating. You need not stay private and tense about that dilemma, though. Rather, you can be transparent about it—meaning that you can openly and explicitly reveal that you're really trying to understand but don't fully “get it” yet and need to ask about certain parts. That in itself is a very positive communication because it shows that you care about understanding him/her and are really trying to do so.

**Why it's important:** While it's natural for many people to think the interaction will go better if they *hide* the fact that they're not understanding something, actually the opposite is the case. If you aren't understanding, you certainly will not subsequently behave or talk in ways that accurately address your partner's expressed needs. But s/he will think you *do* understand, and the lack of the needed response from you will seem to mean that it doesn't matter to you enough to remember. Hiding your non-understanding fosters disconnection and alienation. That's why transparency and openness about how the interaction is developing are so important.

**How to do it:** When you're not yet "getting it," *say so*—for example: "Come here...I really want to understand what you're going through, and I *know* I'm not getting it yet. Would you say it again in another way?"

Statements that will feel invitational can also be formulated in ways like this:

- "Help me to understand why that's important to you..."
- "I really want to see the connection between those two things... how [this aspect] relates to [that aspect] for you...."
- "The part I need you to help me understand better is...."

Alex sees the pained look in Chris's eyes and realizes that Priority One right now is to show her his caring involvement by trying to understand her position before talking about his own view of things. So he says, "I need to understand more about what feels most burdensome to you."



**What might need extra attention:** You might not be accustomed to being open in these ways. For many people, it's a new—and perhaps uncomfortable—experience that makes them feel vulnerable. Such vulnerability, openly expressed between couple partners, is not something that ought to be avoided; in fact it is part of real intimacy.

In some cases a partner has the expectation that if you really love him/her, you'll automatically know what s/he means, how s/he feels, and what s/he needs— *without* your partner even having to tell you. This would take superhuman capabilities, however. The fact that you're not a mind reader does not mean a lack of love or interest. Although s/he may be thinking—or even saying—“How can you possibly not *get* it?” you need to know that it's totally *normal* to find that you don't always immediately understand what another person is thinking or feeling—even your own partner.

That's where transparency comes to the rescue and deepens intimacy in a relationship.

## SKILL 8. DON'T TRY TO FIX YOUR PARTNER'S PROBLEM

There are too many things I have to do all at once.



You should list everything and then prioritize.



**What that means:** This is the skill of refraining from all attempts to solve or undo the problem that your partner is communicating. That means no problem-solving, no giving advice, no telling him/her to feel or see things differently, and not even pointing out the positives (because, despite being well intended, the positives simply do not neutralize or relieve your partner's distress, so you'd seem to be disregarding or trivializing what's feeling awful).

**Why it's important:** Many people assume that being a good and caring partner means jumping in to fix the problem or distress your partner is describing. As a knee-jerk response, that doesn't tend to go well, and here's why: What your partner most wants and needs from you—and the real reason for expressing the problem or distress to you—is to receive your caring understanding of the distress or dilemma s/he's experiencing, *just as it is*. If you go straight to “fixing” or problem-solving mode, your partner will feel you're avoiding connecting with him/her in what s/he's experiencing emotionally. What's most wanted and needed is your accompaniment *right where s/he is* in the distress—not your solution for how to get him/her *away from* where s/he is. Accompanying your partner right there in his/her emotional experience, and simply trying to give understanding of that experience, is what will be comforting and show your caring, whereas attempts to move him/her away from there can create a feeling of being unacceptable or wrong for being in that distress.

Unless s/he explicitly asks for practical advice, you can be pretty sure it's not what's wanted. Jumping in with unwanted advice or solutions can undo every bit of empathy and understanding you've managed to communicate thus far. It can cause the two of you to lose emotional connection, and can even create discord despite your helpful, caring intentions.

**How to do it:** When you find yourself wanting to fix your partner’s difficulty and offer a solution, ask yourself whether you actually *know* that s/he wants a “fix-it” response, rather than an “empathy” response. You’re not a mind reader, so use transparency and openly *ask*: “Is this a time you need me to listen and understand—or do you want me to come up with a suggestion that might be helpful?”

Alex feels tempted to tell Chris how he would approach things if he were in her position, but he quickly remembers that that’s ok to do only if and when she asks him to suggest solutions. So he says things like, “Oh, I see. I didn’t realize how much time goes into doing all those things.”

After a while, Chris says, “I need to hear from you about what’s going to change.” That’s her invitation for solutions. In response, Alex acknowledges that he’s describing what his approach would be...and that he realizes it might not be her choice at all. He avoids any words or tone of telling her what they “should” do—as though he knew what the right answer would be for her. He offers a suggestion and adds, “How would that be for you?”

You’ve been a good listener if your partner feels deeply understood. When s/he’s ready to move on to the practical level and perhaps seek your advice, s/he’ll let you know. If you’re told something along the lines of “I *already know* you understand how I feel. I need a *solution!*” then you’ll know you’ve done things right. That’s your signal that it’s time to say something like, “I have an idea. Do you want to hear what I’m thinking?”

**What might need extra attention:** It may seem counter-intuitive to you to refrain from trying to fix your partner's problem. You may harbor the sincere and unquestioned assumption that it's your job to "fix it" for your partner and that you're failing to *be* a good partner if you *don't* try to fix it. You may feel hurt or disrespected if your attempts at problem-solving are rejected. You may truly believe that you need to respond to any distress or dissatisfaction your partner has by getting him/her out of that distress—as distinct from providing a feeling-level understanding *of* that distress. However, it *isn't possible* to know how to get a person out of his/her distress, so believing it's your job to do so makes you feel anxiety and desperation. It can be hard to trust (or even *remember*) that your partner is not looking to you to solve the problem and eliminate the distress, but rather needs you to provide the caring, accurate understanding that makes him or her feel *caringly accompanied* in the distress.

## SKILL 9. GIVE OR REQUEST AN APOLOGY

You didn't even let me know you'd be two hours late! How do you think that makes me feel?



I apologize. I really should have let you know as soon as I knew I'd be late.



**What that means:** Apologizing means, firstly, genuine recognition that your actions or inactions were heedless, hurtful to your partner, or harmful to the relationship, even if done in pursuit of your own valid needs. Only with such recognition does one feel the sincere regret about the effects on the other person that makes apologizing a natural, necessary response. The apologetic feeling, then, is your own regret over causing suffering and your caring desire to help heal that distress by expressing your regret.

In many cases, regrettable effects result without any bad intentions behind them. However, the absence of any bad intentions or the purely accidental nature of the bad effects

does not remove the need for apologizing as an expression of caring and a step of repair.

**Why it's important:** Apologizing is a universal, age-old, irreplaceable ingredient in human life for repairing and restoring relationships. In trying to meet our own needs and pursue our own well-being, from time to time our ways of doing so have unforeseen negative effects on someone else, creating a rift. A genuine apology is an integral, necessary part of mending such a rift. In some instances, the negative effects were actually intentional, making a heartfelt apology even more crucially important.

**How to do it:** The most common words that people use to apologize are “I’m sorry.” However, that phrase can be spoken—and can come across—in different ways. In order for it to work as an apology, those words need to be spoken with a fitting degree of sincere apologetic feeling behind them. If spoken mechanically, without genuine feeling—as if just hearing those words should satisfy the other person—it isn’t likely to do so, and for good reason. To apologize is to *feel apologetic*. That feeling need only be mild for mild offenses, such as momentary impatience, but it needs to be more heartfelt for behavior that inadvertently was hurtful, such as cracking a joke that made the other person seem stupid or foolish; and it needs to be deep, anguished contrition for causing major suffering, such as by infidelity.

If you’re the one owing an apology, acknowledge that your actions (or inactions) caused distress to your partner and express empathy for what s/he is feeling. The more specifically you refer to your partner’s distress, the more effective your apology will be.

Alex makes a problem-solving, pragmatic suggestion to Chris about how to juggle things differently in the household when, in actuality, she was not asking or wanting him to do that. She yells, "You're not listening to me!" He responds in this way, including an apology: "Oh gee...you're right! I went into fixing mode instead of just getting what you're telling me. No wonder you aren't feeling heard. I'm sorry I did that. Can we go back to what you were saying about feeling too alone in things?"

Maybe *you* are the one feeling a real need for an apology from your partner. A healthy couple relationship is a two-way street, and if you need an apology, you can and should request it.

Last night, when Alex commented sarcastically about the messy state of the kitchen, Chris suddenly grabbed his favorite beer mug and flung it against the wall, smashing it and denting the wall, and giving him quite a scare. This morning he feels she really owes him an apology for that, so he says, "Hey look, I'm sorry I made that sarcastic comment last night. How you reacted is really troubling to me, though. That was pretty violent, and it really crossed a line, and I'm feeling pretty rattled by it." Here he pauses, looking at her and hoping for her apology. If she doesn't offer it, he says, "So I need an apology for that, because I hope you see that that really went too far."



**What might need extra attention:** An apology needs to function as a solemn agreement that the problem behavior will stop happening because that behavior is outside of what's acceptable in the relationship. The apology becomes meaningless if that behavior continues in a repeating pattern that ends each time with another apology.

Your partner's need for apology from you might first show up in the form of blame coming at you. Hearing blame is difficult, to be sure, but it's a signal to begin examining whether you did something to apologize for. Skills 1 through 4, which are about listening and empathizing, are particularly useful for that.

## SKILL 10. CHECK YOUR CURRENT CAPACITY FOR LISTENING

I'm not getting through to you!



It's true—my mind is preoccupied with other things right now.



**What that means:** You can connect well with someone else only when enough of your attention is truly available to give, but that's not always the case, for various valid reasons. Either the quantity or the quality of what you're hearing may exceed your listening capacity at the moment.

**Why it's important:** When your attention is *not* truly available, saying so transparently shows that you are honoring the matter at hand and taking good care of your relationship. Saying that you don't feel available right now makes it clear that you recognize the importance of the topic and want to make sure it gets adequate attention.

**How to do it:** Ask yourself whether you're able and willing, right now, to listen, receive, and consider. If not, say so clearly and lovingly—indicating that you're *not yet* ready to talk more on this topic. You may notice, for instance, that you're unable to concentrate on what your partner is saying; perhaps something else is tugging at you for attention. Or you may be so absorbed by your own reactions to what your partner is saying that you're not in a position to be a good listener.

Your partner may not understand what is making you unable to discuss something right now that *s/he* feels is critically important, and may even worry that your lack of capacity for connection means that the relationship is in trouble. Your partner may need the reassurance of *more* closeness at the very moment that you're feeling difficulty maintaining that connection. This is a time to be reassuring, if you are able, that your need to withdraw briefly from the discussion doesn't mean a lack of caring on your part.

As Alex is listening to Chris, he begins to realize that this discussion is bringing up strong feelings for him, largely distracting him, and that he needs some time to sort out his reactions before he'll be capable of listening well. So he says to Chris, "I know this is important stuff, and I don't want you to feel I'm not here for you... but I'm having some strong reactions that are really gobbling up my attention and making it hard for me to keep listening. I need a break to see what's getting triggered here. I hope that's workable for you."

**What might need extra attention:** You may think it would be better to keep on trying to give your partner the attention s/he needs, even when you're actually not able to do so. "Faking" an ability to listen when your current capacity doesn't allow for it, though, is almost guaranteed to go badly. Your partner will sense that you're not emotionally present...that you're not connecting in the way s/he needs. You might expect that s/he'll be upset with you for saying that you're not in a good position to listen right now, so it can take some courage to be open and honest about that.

Of course, since you're the one requiring the break, your partner needs your explicit assurance that you'll resume the conversation—otherwise, s/he'll feel not only left hanging, but also left alone in caring about things that matter to the relationship. See Skill 12 below for how to arrange for continued communication before taking the break you need.

## SKILL 11. DON'T ENDURE OVERKILL— REQUEST A RESTATEMENT SO YOU CAN HEAR THE MESSAGE



**What that means:** The real reason your partner is expressing something “negative” to you is that what s/he actually wants—satisfying closeness with you—has been in distressingly short supply from his/her point of view. However, what s/he’s saying to you—and how it’s being said—may well sound and feel to you as though you’re being criticized, accused, attacked or even ridiculed and shamed, with no visible trace of positive, caring intent hidden underneath. Naturally, you aren’t able to take in a message that feels too hurtful or toxic.

**Why it's important:** Getting hooked by the surface negativity in your partner's style of communicating can keep the interaction spiraling in ways that are not at all constructive and can even become increasingly destructive. Then the core needs and positive intent each of you has would remain hidden and unaddressed.

**How to do it:** In order to break out of the negative spiral, first remind yourself that what your partner probably is striving for, deep down, is better harmony and closeness with you, even if that isn't coming across to you yet amidst the negativity you're hearing.

Then use "I-messages" to express your need for a more bearable version of what your partner is communicating. You could say, for example, "I'm really trying to listen, but I'm feeling attacked and kind of ridiculed, so it's really hard for me to stay open to what you want me to hear. Could you please try to tell me more about what you *want* for us, and less about how horrible I am?"

Chris has just said, "You never do anything around here," and there seems to be a note of contempt in her voice and manner. Alex notices he has become preoccupied by how put down he's feeling now, so he says, "The way you said that, I feel I'm being told I'm a complete loser and totally worthless, and now I'm totally triggered and distracted by how put down I'm feeling. Could you say it without the overkill, and tell me what you're needing from me?"

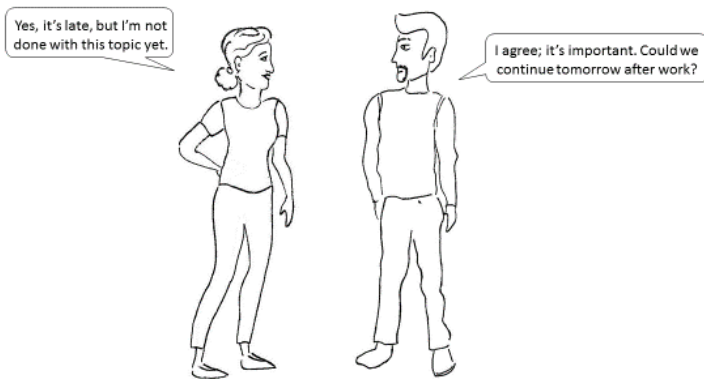
**What might need extra attention:** “I-messages” may be an unfamiliar way of expressing yourself. If so, you might initially feel somewhat self-conscious and awkward doing the self-monitoring and exerting the self-control needed for communicating solely what *you* are now experiencing when feeling criticized (as distinct from pushing back harshly at your partner in retaliation for his/her hurtful behavior or attitude). You could easily feel tempted to respond in kind by dishing out criticism—which would escalate the discontent quickly.

In response to the negative ways your partner is expressing his/her distress, you might plunge into your own strong, negative feelings of various kinds, such as anger, rejection, helplessness, shame, or self-trashing. Such feelings make it very difficult to respond constructively, but perhaps you can remember this: However negative your partner’s manner of self-expression may be, what s/he really wants is your caring understanding of how hurt or disconnected or mistreated s/he feels. And *that* matters to him/her, because what s/he really wants is happy togetherness with *you*!

Your partner might think you’re asking him/her to play down or shield you from the actual, honest intensity of his/her distress. You can explain that you’re *not* asking for that, but just for a version that’s less harsh and attacking so that you’ll be able to “let it in.”

## SKILL 12. PROVIDE FOR CONTINUED COMMUNICATION BEFORE DISENGAGING

**What that means:** Taking care of your relationship requires



showing recognition that the discussion needs to continue until neither partner feels any strong degree of unresolved tension or distress about the matters involved.

**Why it's important:** Failing to reengage after breaking off an emotional discussion—or taking a break without having a plan for reconnecting later—can come across to your partner as dismissive and a lack of caring. That can hurt, alienate, or discourage the person who feels left at loose ends, and who then may draw the conclusion that his/her feelings aren't important to you.



*You* may want to forget all about it and feel no need to continue the discussion in order to resolve the issue, but your partner definitely *does* feel that need. As uncomfortable as it may feel to continue the discussion voluntarily, failing to do so will only result in even more difficult discussions ahead.

**How to do it:** If you're becoming unable to continue the discussion for any reason—whether due to excessive frustration, confusion, defensiveness, time pressure, fatigue, or some other reason—you can maintain continuity by saying, “Could we come back to this later today—right after I get back from my errands? Would that feel alright for you? I’m really running out of capacity at this point.”

The difficult discussion has been feeling workable enough for Alex emotionally, but he’s beginning to feel time pressure because he has something scheduled with other people. He uses transparency once again by saying to Chris, “It’s important for us to finish this discussion, but now I’m starting to feel some time pressure because of that appointment I have soon. Can we pause here and figure out when to resume?”

You’re showing your partner that you’re actively intending to resume the discussion, which sends the caring message that this communication matters to you. Transparency is key here. Doing this via “I-messages”—meaning that you communicate your own needs and feelings, rather than making demands or excuses, or voicing criticism—your needs are more likely to be heard and accepted. It’s a win-win way of interacting.

**What might need extra attention:** It requires self-awareness for you to recognize your own developing needs and reactions, and it can require some courage to express your needs constructively, before they become too intense to manage. A very useful rule of thumb is: *earlier and milder*. Express your need well before anything bursts out with intensity, and you'll be more likely to get a positive response to your request to postpone the discussion.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **ACTIVELY CULTIVATE CLOSENESS**

As you know well from your own experience, a couple relationship is more than fun and games. It requires intentional dedication to creating quality emotional connection and communication. That is what makes partners feel they really matter to one another.

The “garden” of a couple relationship needs to be watered regularly enough by quality emotional communication in order for it to remain green and lush. You may be assuming that the romantic and sexual bliss you experienced at the outset of the relationship ought to be enough to ensure that your togetherness remains delightful, satisfying, and enduring. It just doesn’t work that way. Mutually happy togetherness requires an ongoing cultivation of sensitive mutual understanding.

Partners often have quite different visions of what a couple relationship is: One partner may expect to feel deeply accompanied in all areas of life, while the other one may have a more limited vision of togetherness and what the partners’ roles and division of labor should be. In that kind of separateness, one of the partners can easily feel alone, lonely, resentful, and alienated.

The ways of listening and connecting we’ve taught you in this handbook will enable you to keep discovering so much about each other. You’ll learn to recognize his/her preferred styles of giving and receiving love, such as what is the most meaningful

expression of love, be it affectionate physical touch...or quality time together...or actions that show tender thoughtfulness.

By genuinely listening to what your partner is communicating, you will remain in satisfying togetherness in facing all that needs to be addressed in your shared life.

Follow the steps we've offered you. They work...and are a most worthwhile investment. We find that it's usually more achievable for the partner *less accustomed* to emotional closeness to learn to implement these to-do steps—however awkward it might feel initially—than for a partner *craving* feelings of emotional closeness to generate them somehow, with emotional communication lacking. Those feelings develop *as a result* of being heard and understood and knowing that one's feelings really matter to the other person.

Let your partner know often enough—verbally and nonverbally—what you treasure about him/her and about the relationship. Stop and consciously savor the qualities of emotional closeness that you've worked hard to create. Ask yourself whether you've ever been this *emotionally* intimate and open with anyone.

*We wish you a wonderful relationship...rich with warmth and connection...with your partner.*

## SUMMARY OF COUPLE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

SKILL	WHAT IT MEANS
1. Listen	Give devoted attention—to the best of your ability—to what your partner is telling you, without distractions or multitasking.
2. Listen and acknowledge	This is about letting your partner know that you are actually “letting in” and registering what s/he is telling you.
3. Listen and reflect back	This is the way to check in with your partner as to whether you are understanding accurately what you are hearing.
4. Empathize	To empathize is to put oneself in the other person’s shoes...to pay attention to what the other person is experiencing and, to some degree, to have a vicarious sense of how that feels.
5. Interrupt if necessary, but respectfully	Wait until your partner has finished a sentence, paragraph, or idea before responding.
6. Avoid the phrase “Yes, but...”	It means, quite literally, that you should studiously avoid saying “Yes, but...”

## SUMMARY OF COUPLE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

*(continued)*

7. Invite clarification as needed	Reveal that you're really trying to understand, but don't fully "get it" yet and need to ask about certain parts.
8. Don't try to fix your partner's problem	Refrain from all attempts to solve or undo the problem that your partner is communicating.
9. Give or request an apology	Apologizing requires genuine recognition of having caused hurt or harm and means communicating sincere regret about the effects on the other person.
10. Check your current capacity for listening	You can connect well with someone else only when enough of your attention is truly available to give, but that's not always the case.
11. Don't endure overkill; request a restatement so you can hear the message	What your partner is saying to you may have no visible trace of positive, caring intent hidden underneath, and naturally, you aren't able to take in a message that feels too hurtful or toxic.
12. Provide for continued communication before disengaging	It's important to show recognition that the discussion needs to continue until neither partner feels any unresolved tension or distress about the matters involved.

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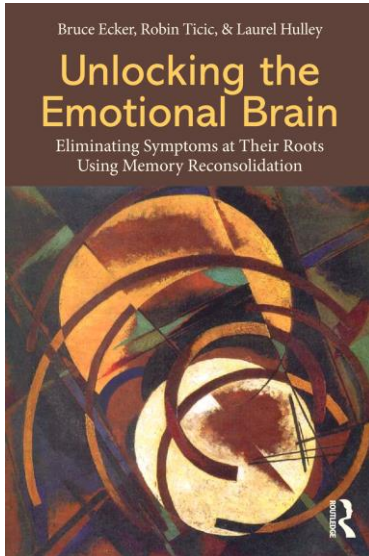
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