Couples Planning: A Treatment Plan Overview for Couples with Communication Problems

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Spend at least one hour, planningsample treatment plans that incorporate behavioral terms, long term goals, short term goals, and appropriate interventions or strategies for each goal selected.

Communication in marriage is like a life giving river. When husband and wife cannot communicate, a huge dam is built stopping the flow of water. This causes everything around them to suffer and slowly die. Seeds that were once planted cannot grow and both spouses develop a strong inward thirst for their unmet needs, eventually causing multiple cracks throughout the relationship. Many promising marriages have fallen into ruin simply because of a lack of communication.

Communication Breakdown

Although we speak with people everyday, true communication is an entirely more personal and dynamic event that is critical for growth in Relationships and understanding. Men and women inherently communicate differently, so it should be no surprise when communication challenges arise between couples. Since effective communication is essential to moving ahead in life, when there are problems relating to each other, it can prove extremely detrimental to any relationship.

Literally, there are tens of thousands of books out there written on this topic alone. Communication is a huge word, and while we may all understand what it means, we so often completely fail in understanding its process and raw power to influence radical change in all areas of life. It is striking that so many marriages completely end on this one component alone. Both spouses may love each other dearly, but without proper communication, that love goes unnoticed and the result is often terrible and tragic.

Understand, Not Understood

Communication failure occurs when one person feels that they are not understood. How many times do you react when a love one doesn’t understand you? We want to be understood….we want to know that our husband or wife, friend, or loved one understands us. And when we don’t feel understood, we react, whether silently, verbally, or with action. Usually those reactions are negative and feed into the cycle of breakdown. But consider this: of all the times you focused on not being understood, how often have you tried to understand the other person? It often doesn’t occur to us in an argument that our loved one is also trying to be understood just like us. Clearly, if we sought more to understand, rather than always seeking to be understood, a lot of arguing would cease and we would find that the cycle of endless hurt is broken.
The Problem of Arguing and Failed Communication

It is estimated that when awake, we spend approximately 70% of our time communicating, 30% of which is talking. This means that over half of our communication is non-verbal. It’s not what you say; it’s how you say it that can be the cause of communication problems between most couples. If you say one thing for instance, such as “everything is fine” but your body language conveys something else, such as a sunken shoulders or a withdrawn face, the dominant communication will be the physical or energetic undertone. When communication between couples becomes strained or even nonexistent, the entire foundation of the relationship is affected. Learning to communicate so everyone involved feels heard is hard work and as the divorce rate shows, many couples are unable to reach this level of understanding and therefore issues are left unresolved and tension deepens leading to a lack of understanding and respect. Ultimately, this may lead to couples simply dissolving the relationship for lack of knowing how to fix the problems. While this may be a temporary solution to their problems, ultimately, they resurface in the next relationship. Communicating effectively is an art but it can be learned. Counseling gives you the tools to communicate successfully so you get what you need and everyone involved is happy.

Why Is Communicating So Difficult?

For the most part, communication breaks down when people fail to adequately say what and how they feel in a non-threatening manner. If we were all completely honest, which of course means being vulnerable, the majority of arguments and conflicts would not occur. As children, we go through experiences, good and bad, that ultimately affect how we communicate in the future. The term emotional baggage is often used to describe these attitudes we carry forward. If, for example, you grew up in a household with an angry parent that everyone constantly tried to avoid or soothe, you will likely carry this attitude into adulthood and when confrontation arises, whether real or perceived, you will either try to calm the situation or run from it. If your spouse says something you perceive to be heated, you will immediately revert back to this childhood memory and in turn, face your mate with your learned response. You will probably do whatever you can to avoid the subject and if your spouse, for instance, comes from a family where everyone accepts anger as a simple outpouring of emotion and nothing more, then the two of you may clash making resolution of issues a regular challenge.

There have been many books written on the subject of gender communication and most of them conclude that men and women truly do think and feel differently. Men communicate in order to relay information. In general, they tend to talk more about topic do not require discussing and relating to feelings and emotions. Men are highly competitive and proverbial problem solvers. Men will often talk to solve problems.Conversely, women typically communicate to connect with others. They would rather talk about people than things and they relay feelings quite readily. Women are more relationship oriented in their speech then men. While not impossible, these differences provide a challenge for us to relate effectively to each other.

Going into a relationship, we often have unrealistic expectations. Romantic novels and blockbuster movies with the stunning, self-sufficient heroine finally getting her perfect, caring, sympathetic man are nothing like the real world. And when we are shocked back to reality during our first communication breakdown, we can feel cheated, disappointed, and often angry. Hurt feelings lead to irrational behavior and blaming, which of course, leads to further communication problems and eventual relationship troubles.

Effective Communication is a Skill

Communicating effectively with each other in a relationship does not come naturally! It may seem that way in the beginning, but as all couples know, once that honeymoon phase is
over, the real challenge begins. It is dangerous to simply think that you can communicate effectively with your spouse on your own. Only through a joint commitment to build communication can greater understanding be reached. It is indeed a skill, and you will need to practice it in this journey of life...perhaps many times, but the good news is that anyone can learn it!

**Behavioral Definitions for Couples with Communication Problems:**

Numerous arguments, or arguing in ways that cause excessive upset.

Difficulty in resolving problems.

Numerous misunderstandings during disputes.

Viewing disagreements as symbols of global problems (such as lack of love and respect) rather than as specific problems.

Consistent failure to orally recognize the positive actions of the other spouse or partner.

**Long Term Goals for Couples with Communication Problems:**

Couple will be able to communicate about feelings without discussion ending in verbal fight.

Couple or spouse will be able to discuss and resolve disputes without any verbal fighting.

Each spouse or partner or spouse listens to and comprehends the other spouse or partner’s point of view.

Spouses or couple will no longer feel that arguments are uncontrollable events, as they learn to recognize cues of verbal fighting, and control them before they start.

Couple recognize and overtly acknowledge when core themes such as love and respect are evoked.

Each spouse or partner notices and orally shows appreciation to the other acts of kindness, thoughtfulness, and caring.

**Short Term Goals for Couples with Communication Problems:**

Couple will orally agree to contract to identify specific communication deficiencies.

Couple will rehearse defining problems in specific, non-blaming form.

Couple will rehearse listening in a manner that promotes empathy and understanding.

Couple will rehearse sharing thoughts and feelings in a manner that promotes intimacy.

Couple will explain the current purpose of the conversation (such as, venting or problem solving) when acting as either the speaker or listener.
Couple will rehearse accepting and rejecting requests in a positive manner.

Couple will reserve 10 to 15 minutes several times per week for evaluation of personal issues.

Couple will learn how to de-escalate conflict.

Couple will identify cues for disputes and rehearse dispute-control strategies.

Couple will identify the cues that each will use to judge that the other is accepting and receptive to problem solving at a specific time.

Couple will voice out how a problem may be opened for discussion. (26,

Couple will demonstrate how to identify the exact nature of a problem before trying to resolve it.

Couple will agree to discuss only one problem at a time after it has been identified.

Couple will use a brainstorming technique as a problem-solving approach.

Couple will identify core themes such as love and respect and learn to communicate about them.

Couple will attend to and compliment the other for helpful or caring behaviors.

**Interventions for Couples with Communication Problems:**

The couple will attempt to solve a major problem to quietly observe and takes notes about communication techniques and deficits in the relationship.

Reinforce positive things done by the couple such as making eye contact or attempting to define the problem. Provide direct feedback regarding things that need to improvement such as maintaining calm tone of voice or overcoming any tendencies to interrupt.

Ask couple to list any actions they can take to help solve communication problems and any actions that tend to make problems worse.

Have couple take turns pointing to problems in the relationship.

Have couple role-play at making statements using -I- as to how the feel when something happens.

Identify the mind-reading spouse or partner and have the other spouse or partner rephrase statements so that he or she is speaking only for self and expressing his or her own perceptions.

Practice having one spouse or partner as the speaker and the other paraphrase, by repeating back in his or her own words, the speaker's point.

Practice having one spouse or partner is serving as the speaker, and have the other reflect, by repeating back in his or her own words, the speaker's underlying emotion
Have the listening spouse or partner use validation sills and showing that he or she understands and can empathize with the speaker’s feelings, even if he or she does not agree with them.

If problem solving is at an impasse, have couple change places and discuss the issue from the other’s perspective.

Have couple exchange their feelings about issues about which they would like to be closer.

Give a list of emotional words, to indicate to the couple the underlying meaning of words expressing feelings.

Teach couple how to balance the need to comment about the spouse or partner, against a concern for his or her feelings. Have them rehearse this on areas of conflict or dispute.

Teach couple that communication serves two purposes-venting (such as, sharing feelings) or problem solving. Teach the couple how to identify how they feel when one person is venting and the other is problem solving.

Role-play at having the listener ask the speaker what he or she wants out of the discussion-venting or problem solving.

Have one rehearse making suggestions for enjoyable activities and the other rehearse accepting using eye contact, reinforcement for asking.

Have one rehearse making suggestions for enjoyable activities together and the other rehearse rejecting using the positive-negative-positive method. That is reinforcing the spouse or partner for asking, identifying the specific area being rejected, and making a counter-suggestions.

The couple sets aside 10 to 15 minutes two or three times a week for a one on one meeting to discuss suggestions or complaints in positive manner.

Teach couple the listener skill of editing. How to respond to provocation in a manner that is in the long-term best interest, rather than the immediate debate.

Teach couple the listener technique of meta-communication. Commenting on the process rather than the content of the words said. Rehearse this to correct dysfunctional communication, rather than acting out any anger over negative communication behaviors.

Ask to identify behaviors any of them might employ during disputes to soothe or de-escalate the conflict.

Ask couple to confirm whether he or she interprets the other’s soothing or de-escalation behaviors as such. If true, couple increases soothing/de-escalation behaviors. If not working have couple discuss their opposing view as why they do not work.

Help couple identify cues that a dispute is about to begin (such as behaviors, thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations).

Have the couple contract with each other actions they will take to cool off before talking further.
Teach couple how to track times and places that trigger arguments.

Help couple identify areas that are conducive to solving problems such as leaving problem solving after the children are in bed.

Help couple list cues that show that either one is receptive to discuss problem solving such as when the spouse or partner is alert and not too tired, or there are no distractions are present.

Have each rehearse how to approach the other to discuss a problem.

Have the couple agree to establish an agenda and time limit for problem-solving disputes.

Teach couple how to agree to mutual satisfaction that a problem has been correctly indicated, before trying to solve the problem. Have couple practice this during a session on areas of conflict.

Have both couple agree to discuss only one problem during problem-solving disputes.

Teach the couple brainstorming techniques that produces at least three solutions to a problem before trying to solve the problem, and have them rehearse this in session on areas of conflict.

Teach couple how to assess the pros and cons of the brainstormed solutions. Couple may rehearse this during sessions.

Teach couple how to make a specific plan to obtain a solution. Have them plan a time in the future to evaluate progress on the solution agreed on. Couple should rehearse during session.

Help couple list the core themes (such as, love, respect) that undermine their most effectively charged disputes.

Have couple rehearse how to discuss the core theme as part of their problem disputes.

Assign both couple to keep track on paper and bring to session the times they caught their spouse or partner do one positive.

Have each spouse or partner use -I- sentences to express his or her appreciation for the other spouse or partner's behaviors noted.

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