

Speaker skills

1. Talk from your own perspective (sometimes called “I” statements)

Talk about your own thoughts, feelings, hopes and needs. Talk about yourself (use “I”) and avoid you-statements. Avoid making “I” statements that are actually demands, criticisms or accusations.

2. Self-disclose feelings

Try to open up emotionally and communicate what you feel. Disclose your feelings directly using simple words to describe your underlying feelings (sadness, regret, anxiety, envy, guilt, shame, jealousy, hurt etc.) Describe your wants and needs directly in the knowledge that these are requests not rights.

3. Discuss specific situations and behaviours (clear and concrete)

Talk about specific situations and behaviours. Avoid generalizations (“always, never”) and comments on the character of your partner (personality attributes)

4. Stay with the here and now

Stick to the subject you’re discussing. Don’t ransack the family chest of grievances or pull old hurts from the past. When you feel like doing so it’s likely you’re starting to feel defensive, to win an argument, maintain a position of self-righteousness or justify how you feel or behaved. These are all self-defeating and keep you stuck in your mutual trap of pain and resentment

Listener skills

1. Active listening – attend

Active listening means to pay full attention to your partner and to show your interest by making brief comments or asking short questions to clarify what’s being said. Nod and look at your partner. Avoid making any non-verbal gestures that could suggest either a lack of interest or disagreement with what’s being said.

2. Paraphrase

Give your partner feedback that shows you’ve paid attention to what’s been said and that you’ve understood its importance to them. Paraphrase or summarize in your own words what your partner just said, especially what they said about their feelings.

3. Open-ended questions

If you’re not sure how your partner thinks or feels ask open-ended questions. Ask ‘who, what, where, when, and why’ questions, rather than questions that can be answered only with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Follow up with, “is there more”, to extend the discussion.

4. Defusing & admitting

If your partner makes a criticism or complaint about something they think you’ve done, or haven’t done and should have done, or that hurt or wounded them, there’s probably some truth in what they’re saying. This makes us feel guilty and ashamed. Pause. Notice your emotional state and whatever urges you’re experiencing to retaliate or defend yourself. Acknowledge openly and apologise sincerely for any part you had to play in how they felt. Avoid at all costs ending your apology with the word “but”. Ask what you can do to help.