UT Southwestern Employee Assistance Program
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How to Improve Your Relationship

1. Calm down.

Flooding can occur if you feel so overwhelmed by your partner's negativity that you become hostile, defensive, or withdrawn. It is virtually impossible to think clearly when your blood is pumping furiously and your heart is racing. By taking a few moments to step away from a heated discussion with your partner until you are completely calm (to go for a relaxing drive, take a bath, listen to music, talk to a friend, or just simply to leave the room), upon returning you will be much more able to hear and understand your partner's point of view (which is a very important component in developing and maintaining a successful relationship). Practice taking calming breaks when you feel yourself starting to become flooded. Clarify with your partner beforehand that by doing so, you're not trying to avoid the conversation – you just need a few moments to calm down so that you can attend to the issue at hand with a clear and level head.

2. Speak nondefensively.

Learning to listen and speak to your partner without feeling the need to defend yourself and without triggering their defensiveness can work wonders for your relationship. Defensiveness can lead to endless spirals of negativity which can throw off the balance of positive to negative feelings and interactions between you and your partner. By being a good listener – attempting to genuinely understand and empathize with the feelings behind the words you hear – you can help to defuse any defensiveness your partner may feel. When expressing your unhappiness or displeasure with something your partner has said or done, keep your complaint specific – avoid blaming, criticizing, and name-calling. Stick to one situation and use "I"-statements to express how you feel (Ex: "I am upset because…"). Remember, your goal is to solve a particular problem, not "win" an argument.

3. Validate your partner.

Letting your partner know in little ways that you understand him or her is one of the most powerful tools for healing your relationship. When you put yourself in your partner's shoes and imagine what it must feel like in his or her emotional state, you are communicating to your partner that you believe his or her feelings are important, even if you don't necessarily feel the same way they do. Taking responsibility for your actions, apologizing to your partner, and complimenting them for handling a situation well can add a high level of validation to the conversation. At the very least, just by listening to and acknowledging your partner's point of view (even if you don't share it) can be extremely helpful. If you still can't seem to understand your partner's point of view, let him or her know that you are trying (Ex: "Right now, I'm just taking in what you're saying and attempting to understand how you feel.").

4. Try and try again.

Learning a new skill takes practice. When you overlearn a communication skill, you will have easier access to it when you need it most – during an argument or heated fight when you are physiologically aroused. Change doesn't happen overnight, but if you continue to practice healthy skills, over time you can greatly improve the quality of your relationship.

Material adapted from *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail…And How You can Make Yours Last* by John Gottman, Ph.D., ©1994