

Hope Therapy & Counselling



Communication in Relationships

Tools for having difficult conversations, setting boundaries, and truly being heard

A FREE RESOURCE GUIDE

A practical guide from Hope Therapy & Counselling Services

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Research into what makes relationships thrive consistently points to one factor above almost all others: the quality of communication between the people involved. Not how much you have in common, not how compatible your personalities are — but how well you talk, listen, repair, and connect.

Poor communication is the most commonly cited reason couples seek therapy, and one of the strongest predictors of relationship breakdown. It underlies most relationship conflict, feelings of loneliness within relationships, and the gradual erosion of intimacy and trust over time.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." — George Bernard Shaw

The good news is that communication is a skill — not a fixed trait. It can be learned, practised, and significantly improved at any age and at any stage of a relationship.

Good communication is not about winning arguments or always knowing the right thing to say. It is about creating enough safety and understanding between people that difficult things can be said — and heard.

Our own nervous system

When we feel threatened, criticised, or overwhelmed, the brain's threat response activates — reducing our capacity for rational thinking and empathy. This is why timing and emotional regulation matter so much.

Assumptions and mind-reading

We routinely assume we know what others mean, feel, or intend — and act on those assumptions without checking. We also assume others know what we need without us saying it. Both are recipes for misunderstanding.

Different communication styles

People learn to communicate in their families of origin and bring those patterns into adult relationships. What one person experiences as directness, another may experience as aggression.

Unspoken needs and feelings

Much of what drives difficult communication is not the surface issue being discussed, but the unmet need or unspoken feeling underneath it. Arguments about chores are rarely just about chores.

Defensiveness and ego protection

The urge to defend ourselves or 'win' a conversation often prevents us from genuinely hearing the other person. Feeling heard and being right are different things.

Technology and distraction

Phones, screens, and constant connectivity have significantly reduced the quality of attention we give each other. Many communication problems in modern relationships are partly about presence — or the lack of it.

Past patterns and attachment

Our earliest relationships shape how we communicate and how much safety we feel in closeness. Patterns from childhood — particularly anxious or avoidant attachment — show up powerfully in adult communication.

Unresolved conflict

When old grievances remain unaddressed, they accumulate. New disagreements get loaded with historical weight, making it harder to resolve anything cleanly.

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The Four Communication Styles

Which one are you?

Psychologists identify four broad communication styles. Most people default to one or two, particularly under stress. Understanding your style — and your partner's — is the starting point for change.

Passive

Avoiding expressing needs or opinions. Going along with others to keep the peace. Struggling to say no. The cost: needs go unmet, resentment builds quietly.

Common phrases: "It's fine, don't worry about it." / "Whatever you think."

Aggressive

Expressing needs in ways that disregard or override others. Interrupting, criticising, blaming. Wins battles, loses relationships.

Common phrases: "You always do this." / "You never listen."

Passive-Aggressive

Indirect expression of hostility: sarcasm, sulking, silent treatment, subtle undermining. Creates confusion and erodes trust.

Common phrases: "Fine." / "I'll just do everything myself."

Assertive

Expressing needs clearly and honestly, while respecting the other person's perspective. The goal is not to win, but to be understood — and to understand. This is the style this guide helps you develop.

Common phrases: "I feel... when... because..." / "Can we talk about this?"

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The Gottman Four Horsemen

The warning signs — and their antidotes

Dr John Gottman's decades of research on couples identified four communication patterns that predict relationship breakdown with over 90% accuracy. Crucially, he also identified the antidote to each one.

Criticism

Attacking your partner's character rather than a specific behaviour. 'You're so selfish' rather than 'I felt hurt when...'

ANTIDOTE

Antidote — Gentle start-up: Describe the specific situation, express how you feel, and state a positive need. 'I feel lonely when we don't have time together. Can we plan something this week?'

Contempt

The most destructive of all: treating your partner with disrespect, mockery, sarcasm, or dismissiveness. Communicates 'I am superior to you.' Deeply erodes love and trust.

ANTIDOTE

Antidote — Build a culture of appreciation: Actively and regularly express appreciation, respect, and affection. Contempt is fuelled by accumulated negativity; appreciation rebuilds the positive perspective.

Defensiveness

Responding to concern or criticism by making excuses, counter-attacking, or playing the victim. Prevents the other person from feeling heard.

ANTIDOTE

Antidote — Take responsibility: Even if you only agree with part of what is being said, acknowledge it. 'You're right that I've been distracted lately. I'm sorry.' Even partial ownership de-escalates.

Stonewalling

Emotionally shutting down or disengaging during conflict. Often a sign of emotional flooding — but experienced by the other person as abandonment or dismissal.

ANTIDOTE

Antidote — Physiological self-soothing: Ask for a break of at least 20 minutes. Commit to returning to the conversation. Use the break to genuinely calm down — not to rehearse arguments.

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Active Listening

The foundation of feeling truly heard

Most of us listen to respond, not to understand. We are formulating our reply while the other person is still speaking. Active listening is the deliberate practice of giving full attention — not to evaluate, fix, or rebut.

The elements of active listening

Full presence

Put the phone down. Turn toward the person. Give them your undivided attention. Physical presence signals that they matter.

Don't interrupt

Let the person finish before responding. The pause after they finish is often where the most important thing gets said.

Listen for feelings, not just facts

What emotion is underneath what they are saying? Hearing the feeling beneath the words communicates deeper understanding.

Reflect back

Paraphrase what you heard: 'So what I'm hearing is that you felt left out when...' This shows you were listening and gives them a chance to correct any misunderstanding.

Ask, don't assume

'Can you tell me more about that?' 'What did that feel like for you?' Curiosity is one of the greatest gifts in communication.

Validate before solving

Most people need to feel understood before they want solutions. 'That sounds really hard' often means more than a list of suggestions.

REMINDER

What active listening is not: Waiting for your turn to speak · Thinking about your reply while they're still talking · Immediately offering solutions · Dismissing or minimising · Turning the conversation back to yourself

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Speaking So You're Heard

The tools of assertive communication

Assertive communication is honest, direct, and respectful. It expresses your needs and feelings without attacking the other person or abandoning your own needs to keep the peace.

The I Statement

Instead of leading with what the other person did wrong (which triggers defensiveness), you lead with your own experience.

TECHNIQUE

The I Statement Formula:

"I feel [emotion] when [specific situation] because [impact on me]. What I need is [specific request]."

Instead of (You statement)	Try this (I statement)
"You never listen to me. You always make me feel like I don't matter."	"I feel frustrated when I'm interrupted when I'm talking and you're on your phone. I need to be heard."
"You're so unreliable. I can't count on you for anything."	"I feel anxious when plans change at the last minute. It would really help if you could stick to the plan."

Other assertive communication tools

Broken record

Calmly repeating your key point without escalating: 'I understand you see it differently. What I need is...' Useful when feeling pressured to back down.

Fogging

Acknowledging partial truth in criticism without accepting the whole: 'You might be right that I could have handled that better.'

Saying no clearly

'No' is a complete sentence. 'I'm not able to do that' or 'That doesn't work for me.' Avoid over-apologising or over-explaining.

Asking for what you need

Be specific. 'It would really help if you could do bedtime on Tuesdays.' Specificity makes requests actionable.

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The Art of the Difficult Conversation

How to approach conversations that matter

Difficult conversations are the ones we avoid or approach in ways that make them harder. How you approach them matters enormously.

Step 1: Choose the right moment

Don't raise important issues when either of you is tired, hungry, stressed, or rushed. Ask: 'Is now a good time to talk about something important?' If the answer is no, agree on a specific time — not 'later'.

Step 2: Start gently

The first 3 minutes of a conversation often determine its entire trajectory. Begin with the situation, not a character judgement. Lead with curiosity or vulnerability rather than accusation.

Step 3: Stay in the present

Avoid bringing in a catalogue of past grievances. Stick to the specific situation you are addressing. Phrase things as 'recently' rather than 'always' or 'never'.

Step 4: Take breaks when flooded

If either of you becomes significantly overwhelmed, pause. Say: 'I want to keep talking about this, but I need 20 minutes to calm down first.' Return at the agreed time.

Step 5: Aim for understanding, not winning

The goal is for both of you to feel heard — not for one of you to be right. Two people can see the same situation differently and both be telling the truth.

Step 6: End with a repair or next step

Agree on something concrete: a change, a commitment, or simply acknowledging what was said. Express appreciation: 'Thank you for talking about this with me.'

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Non-Violent Communication (NVC)

Marshall Rosenberg's transformative framework

Non-Violent Communication (NVC), developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is built on the idea that most conflict arises from unmet needs — and that when we express those needs clearly, connection becomes possible.

The Four Steps of NVC

1. Observations (not evaluations)

Describe what you actually observed — the concrete behaviour — without interpretation, judgement, or exaggeration.

Not: "You're always so dismissive." But: "When I was telling you about my day and you picked up your phone..."

2. Feelings (not thoughts or accusations)

Express how you genuinely feel using emotion words. Avoid disguised accusations.

Not: "I feel like you don't care." But: "I felt hurt and unimportant."

3. Needs (the universal human drivers)

Identify the underlying need that was not met. Needs are universal — connection, respect, safety, understanding, autonomy.

Not: "You should pay more attention." But: "I have a need to feel that our time together matters."

4. Requests (specific and doable)

Make a clear, specific, positive request — not a demand. A request invites a response; a demand punishes non-compliance.

Not: "Stop ignoring me." But: "Would you be willing to put your phone away during dinner?"

EXAMPLE

NVC in practice:

"When I came home last night and you didn't ask how my interview went [observation], I felt deflated and alone [feeling], because I really needed to feel that you were in my corner [need]. Would you be willing to ask me how things went when I get home from important events? [request]"

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Setting & Holding Boundaries

Communicating your limits with clarity and care

Boundaries are not walls. They are the honest expression of what you need in order to feel safe, respected, and able to show up in a relationship.

Types of boundaries

Emotional

What you are and are not willing to accept emotionally: how you are spoken to, what topics you engage with, how much emotional labour you carry for others.

Time

How you spend your time, what you commit to, and what you say no to. Protecting your time is sustainability, not selfishness.

Digital

When and how you are contactable, what is shared about you, and what happens with phones or screens during shared time.

Relational

What you need in terms of closeness and distance, how much you share, and how much space you need — including with family members, friends, and in-laws.

How to set a boundary

Be clear and specific

Vague boundaries are hard to respect. Instead of: 'I need more space.' Try: 'I need an hour to decompress when I get home before we talk about the day.'

Use I statements, not rules

Boundaries are about your needs, not orders about others' behaviour. 'When I'm spoken to in that tone, I shut down and can't engage.'

State consequences calmly

A boundary without a consequence is a wish. Be clear about what you will do if the boundary is not respected — not as a threat, but as honest information.

Hold the boundary

The first time you set a boundary is often tested. Consistency is essential. You do not need to explain or apologise for your boundary.

"Boundaries are the distance at which I can love both you and myself simultaneously." — Prentis Hemphill

No relationship is conflict-free. What separates relationships that thrive from those that erode is not the absence of conflict — it is the ability to repair afterwards. Gottman's research found that repair attempts — even clumsy ones — are one of the strongest predictors of relationship health.

Acknowledge what happened

Before jumping to 'let's move on', name what occurred. Acknowledgement validates both people's experience without assigning blame.

Take genuine responsibility

Identify your part — however small. Avoid the non-apology: 'I'm sorry you felt that way.' Genuine accountability requires owning impact, not just intent.

Listen to understand

Ask the other person what the experience was like for them. Listen without defending. You are not agreeing — you are understanding.

Share your experience

Once they have been heard, share yours — not to reopen the argument, but to be known. Using I statements keeps this informative rather than accusatory.

Agree on something different

Repair without learning is just a reset. Small, specific agreements are more useful than grand intentions.

Reconnect

After a conflict, actively rebuild connection. Repair is not only verbal — physical and emotional reconnection matters.

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Across Different Relationships

One size does not fit all

The principles in this guide apply broadly — but different relationships have different dynamics, power structures, and needs.

Romantic partnerships

The relationship where communication is most intimate — and often most charged. Key focus areas: active listening, I statements, the Gottman antidotes, and regular repair.

Family relationships

Often carry the heaviest history. Old patterns from childhood reassert themselves quickly. You can only control your side of the communication.

Friendships

Friendships often suffer from things left unsaid. Bringing gentle honesty into friendship tends to deepen rather than damage them.

Workplace relationships

Power dynamics make workplace communication more complex. I statements and NVC are still effective. Many people are significantly more passive at work than elsewhere.

LGBTQIA+ relationships

May involve additional layers: navigating different coming out experiences, managing unsupportive family systems, and sometimes processing internalised messages about worth. Hope Therapy offers affirming support for all relationship structures and identities.

Neurodivergent communication

Neurodivergent people may communicate differently in ways that are often misread as disinterest or emotional unavailability. Understanding these differences can transform communication and reduce unnecessary conflict.

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Self-Assessment Checklist

How is communication working for you?

Tick anything that feels true for you in your current relationships.

When I communicate

I often find it hard to express what I'm feeling in the moment

I tend to avoid difficult conversations for as long as possible

I often say 'it's fine' when it isn't

I find it hard to ask for what I need directly

I often feel like I'm not being heard, even when I've said something

I tend to apologise even when I don't think I was wrong

Under stress, I tend to either escalate or shut down

In conflict

Arguments in my relationship tend to go in circles without resolution

I or my partner often bring up past grievances during current disagreements

One or both of us shuts down or withdraws during conflict

I find it hard to hear criticism without becoming defensive

We rarely fully repair after a significant argument

In my relationships generally

There are things I have been wanting to say for a long time but haven't

I feel lonely or disconnected in one or more of my close relationships

I am not confident that the people close to me know what I truly need

I recognise patterns in my relationships that I would like to change

Would couples or relationship therapy help?

If communication in your relationship feels stuck, our free 15-minute consultation is a gentle first step.

Book at: calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation

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Reflection Exercises

Exploring your own communication patterns

Exercise 1: Your Communication History

We learn to communicate in our families of origin. Understanding those patterns is the first step to choosing something different.

How was conflict handled in the family you grew up in?

What communication patterns do you still carry today?

Exercise 2: A Conversation You've Been Avoiding

Think of a conversation you have been putting off. Use these questions to prepare.

What is the conversation, and who is it with?

Using the I statement formula, how could you open this conversation?

"I feel _____ when _____ because _____. What I need is _____."

Exercise 3: Your Communication Goals

What is one specific thing you will try differently this week?

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When to Seek Professional Support

Some communication problems need more than a guide

Self-help resources can make a real difference, but some communication difficulties benefit significantly from professional support. Consider reaching out if:

Communication in your relationship has broken down significantly

The same arguments happen repeatedly without resolution

You or your partner have shut down or withdrawn from conversation

There is significant contempt, criticism, or resentment in the relationship

You feel chronically unheard, unseen, or misunderstood

You recognise patterns from your past affecting your current relationships

You find it very difficult to express needs or assert yourself

Communication difficulties are affecting your mental health or daily life

You are considering ending a relationship but want to explore all options first

IMPORTANT

Important note: This guide is not appropriate for relationships involving abuse, coercive control, or domestic violence. If this applies to your situation, please contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 (free, 24/7).

"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said." – Peter Drucker

Therapy for communication difficulties can be individual or couples-based, and often the most powerful work involves both. Here is what we offer at Hope Therapy.

Couples Therapy

Provides a structured space in which both partners can be heard by a neutral, skilled third party. It helps identify the patterns maintaining communication difficulties, teaches new skills, and facilitates conversations that feel impossible to have alone.

Individual Counselling

Sometimes the most useful first step is individual work – exploring your own patterns, attachment style, and communication history. Understanding how your past shapes how you communicate today creates the foundation for genuine change.

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Helps identify the thinking patterns and behaviours that drive communication difficulties – including catastrophising, mind-reading, defensiveness, and avoidance – and builds practical new skills to replace them.

EMDR

Where communication difficulties are rooted in past trauma or attachment wounds – where certain tones of voice or experiences of rejection trigger disproportionate responses – EMDR can help process and reframe the underlying material.

Family Therapy

When communication difficulties involve family systems – including parents, siblings, or adult children – family therapy provides a space to address longstanding patterns with everyone present.



Ready to communicate better?

A free, no-obligation 15-minute conversation with one of our therapists.
No pressure — just a chance to explore whether we can help.

calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation

- ✓ Individual counselling and CBT
- ✓ Couples therapy for all relationship types and structures
- ✓ Family therapy and support
- ✓ Affirming support for LGBTQIA+ individuals and couples
- ✓ Experienced support for neurodivergent clients
- ✓ Online sessions nationwide and face-to-face in selected locations

Or visit us at:

www.hopefulminds.co.uk

This resource is for informational and self-help purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional support.