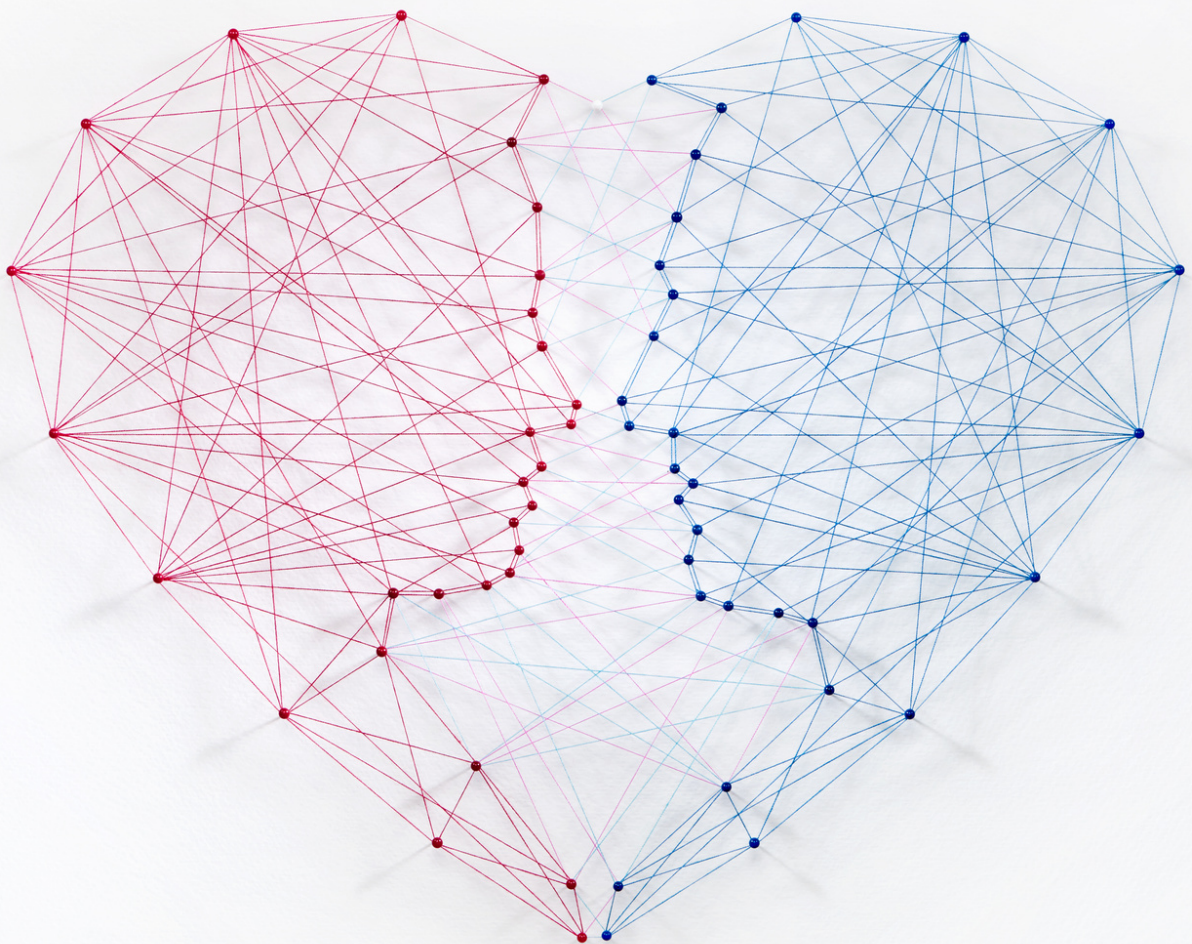


# AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION GUIDE



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# How to Help People Hear You

## An Effective Communication Guide

We all want to feel heard by others. When you don't feel heard, it's a problem. While it feels like it all depends on your partner taking the time to listen, you can influence whether your partner listens to you.

You can't "make" your partner listen, but you can make it easier for your partner to listen. Have you ever been in an argument and felt the other person wasn't listening to you? This happens because being emotional blocks people's ability to pay attention to the meaning of words. The only thing they "hear" is how they feel.

If you can talk without triggering the other person's defensiveness, you have a much better chance of being heard.

And, with just a little practice, you can learn how to do this, giving you have the best chance of feeling heard and understood.

**"There are no magic words."** You can frame your message in ways designed to be sensitive to the recipient's frame of mind and emotional triggers, but you cannot fully avoid upsetting another person. Some messages are just plain hard to hear and upsetting. When you attempt to deliver a tough message without upsetting the other person, you have strayed into trying to manage the other person's emotional state. Managing something you have no control over is an exercise in futility. And, in this situation, is also likely avoiding full honesty.

This guide covers communicating assertively and the six principles for effective communication. Once we've gone through the nuts and bolts of all that, I'll walk you through a template so you can write your own scripts for bringing up difficult topics in effective ways to maximize your chances of being heard.

When you're done with this guide, you'll have the tools you need to communicate effectively and a template for navigating even tough conversations. If you have questions or want to share a successful conversation, join my Facebook group, Creating Soulful Relationships. We'd love to hear your stories and cheer you on.

## Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is a way of communicating where you hold the desires, feelings, opinions, and rights of all parties—you and everyone else—in equal regard.

### When you communicate assertively:

- Others understand you better
- Others are better able to support you
- Keeps emotions from flaring up too much
- Makes you a more powerful communicator

Let's contrast assertive communication with two other styles: **passive** and **aggressive**:

### Passive Communication

Passive communication implies that the other person is more important than you are.

The passive communication style is a way to avoid speaking up for yourself. When you use this style, you are taking the position that your desires, feelings, opinions, and rights are less important than the other person's.

### Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication implies you are more important than the other person. Similarly, if you communicate using an aggressive style, you are not taking into consideration the desires, feelings, opinions, or rights of others.

### ***Assertiveness is not Aggressive***

To many people who are not used to communicating assertively, it can feel aggressive, but don't confuse the two styles. Being aggressive means you are not taking others into account, but being assertive is holding everyone (you and others) in equal regard.

## An Effective Communication Guide

## Your Rights in Relationships

The biggest stumbling block my clients have had in learning assertive communication is overcoming common assumptions about their rights as adults in relationships. People have many assumptions that impede expressing their desires, feelings, and opinions. Some assumptions they learned as children, while others are “rules” they learned to avoid unpleasant interactions with others.

Some assumptions listed below are social norms—unstated expectations about how to behave. Sometimes, following the social norm is the best option. But in others, the assumption should be challenged and your basic rights asserted.

For each assumption, there is a corresponding basic human right. You may not ascribe to all these assumptions, but take careful note of the ones you use and examine the corresponding right.

Assumption	Right
It is selfish to put your needs before others’ needs.	You have a right to put yourself first sometimes
If you can’t convince others that your feelings are reasonable, then your feelings are wrong or unreasonable.	You have a right to all your feelings.
People don’t want to hear that you feel bad. You shouldn’t take up other people’s time with your problems. Keep it to yourself.	You have a right to ask for what you want, including help and emotional support.
You should respect the views of others, especially if they are in positions of authority, and keep your opinions to yourself. Listen and learn.	You have a right to your opinions and convictions.
You should always be logical and consistent.	You have a right to change your mind.

## An Effective Communication Guide

Assumption	Right
Other people have good reasons for their actions and it is not polite to question them. You should be flexible and adjust.	You have a right to be angry and protest unfair treatment or criticism.
It is shameful to make mistakes. You need an appropriate response for every occasion.	You have a right to make mistakes.
It's impolite to interrupt people.	You have a right to interrupt to ask for clarification.
Don't ask for things to be different, because things could be worse. It's better not to rock the boat.	You have a right to negotiate for change.
Be grateful for what you have, because others have it so much worse. Other people have problems of their own and don't want to hear your problems.	You have a right to feel and express pain.
If someone takes the time to give you their advice or opinion, take it seriously. They are probably right.	You have a right to make your own decisions, regardless of the advice or opinions of others.
Knowing that you did something well is its own reward. No one likes a show-off or a braggart. No one likes arrogance. Successful people are disliked and envied.	You have a right to receive recognition for your work and achievements
You should always try to accommodate others. If you don't, they won't be there when you need them.	You have a right to say no.

## An Effective Communication Guide



Assumption	Right
Don't be antisocial. People will think you don't like them if you'd rather spend time alone instead of with them.	You have a right to be alone, even if others would prefer your company.
You should always have a good reason for what you feel and do. And you should be able to explain your reason to another's satisfaction. If you can't, then it isn't a good enough reason and you shouldn't feel that way.	You have a right not to have to justify yourself to others.
When someone is in trouble, you should help them.	You have a right not to be responsible for other people's behaviors, actions, feelings, or problems.
You should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of others, even when they cannot tell you what they want.	You have a right not to anticipate others' needs and wishes.
It's not nice to put people off. If someone asks you a question, give an answer.	You have a right to choose not to respond to a situation.
If someone wrongs you, forgive them. It's the right thing to do.	You have a right to decide when and whether to forgive someone else.

### In Short...

Come from the perspective that you and your partner BOTH have all these rights.

**Communicating effectively will be a lot easier.**

## An Effective Communication Guide

## Six Guidelines for Effective Assertive Communication

Now let's take these rights and start communicating from an assertive position. As you learn to communicate more effectively, there are six guidelines to follow:

- 1.** Be honest and open about how you feel. This requires you to be vulnerable—a scary proposition if you haven't done so before. Remember that being vulnerable is how people connect, and that's what you need—you need your partner to connect with you so you can tell the truth.
- 2.** Focus on what you want, not on what your partner did. This is hard because it's easier to focus on what went wrong than on what we want. The trick is to ask yourself how you want to feel or what you want to have happen, not focus on how your partner is behaving. You want to get your point across to your partner—not point your finger.
- 3.** Be specific about what you want. If you are general (e.g., "I need you to take more initiative around the house"), your partner has lots of room to get it wrong. Instead, be specific: "I want you to clean the kitchen after I cook dinner."
- 4.** Have the conversation when you are calm so you can be matter-of-fact. This keeps your partner's defenses down. Getting to a state of calm about a situation that has upset you may require that you wait until the next day to talk about it. Sleep is good for helping us hit the emotional reset button.
- 5.** Avoid statements that are judgmental or that blame your partner. If you get judge-y, your partner will get defensive and won't be able to listen to what you are saying—the opposite of communicating effectively.
- 6.** Don't apologize for your wants or needs. Your desires are nothing to apologize for. If you want something from your partner, ask for it. He may push back or try to negotiate with you, and that's okay. But resist the urge to apologize.

## An Effective Communication Guide

## When to Have the Conversation

Do you ever struggle to bring up something potentially upsetting? If the two of you are getting along, you don't want to cause a fight, but if the two of you are already fighting, you don't want to make it worse.

So, if you can't bring it up when their relationship is calm and happy and you can't bring it up when times are a little more difficult, when can you bring it up?

Here are some things to consider:

- Bring it up as soon as possible, ideally in the moment
- Be mindful of your and your partner's physical and emotional state. Avoid lengthy, emotional discussions if either of you are hungry, angry, lonely or tired (remember HALT)
- Hold relationships "board meetings" periodically where you talk about the mundane aspects of your relationship (e.g., household chores) and minor disagreements.

## Conversation Template

Here's where we put everything together and get to the nitty-gritty of the mechanics of assertive communication.

Here is my three-part formula:

**#1**

**Address the situation  
from your partner's  
perspective**

**#2**

**Talk about how you  
are feeling or affected  
by the situation**

**#3**

**Make a request**

## An Effective Communication Guide



**Next is an example of how the 3-part formula works. Following the example, is a worksheet where you can work through your own situation and come up with a script for communicating effectively.**

*Gloria\* plopped down on my couch and burst into tears. She and her husband had had another argument and she didn't know what to do. Through her tears she described what happened. For the last few months, Tony\* had been occupying his time in their garage with his projects, leaving Gloria with most of the responsibility for managing their two children and the household, as well as working her part-time job. She felt abandoned by him and no amount of asking him to help had changed this dynamic. She was at her wits' end. The most recent argument was after she asked him again to help her.*

*In many cases, when one partner has repeatedly asked the other for something to no avail, it is easy to get discouraged and quit asking. It can make someone feel like they don't deserve what they're asking for or that their partner doesn't really love them. If this has happened to you, consider changing your approach, not your message. If your message is your truth, then you need to stand by your truth. There are many ways to get your truth out there. Communicating assertively may help you be heard more easily.*

*Gloria acknowledged that she had stormed into the garage and demanded, "What is so important out here that you are ignoring your family?" She understood that wasn't the best approach, but she was hurt and frustrated. She felt she had been quite clear with Tony over the past several weeks and she was losing her patience.*

*Using this information and the three-part strategy for assertive communication, we constructed a way for Gloria to approach Tony and tell him what she needed. We started by taking a look at what was happening from Tony's perspective. Gloria told me that he was working more than fifty hours a week on a project at work. She imagined that he was physically tired at the end of the day and feeling stressed from work pressures. He probably felt like he needed to relax, but found their young children noisy and stressful. She knew he didn't like doing chores, but she didn't understand why he didn't want to talk with her about his stress. She understood more after I explained that talking about something stressful often just amplifies the stress.*

\*Names and identifying details have been changed.

## **An Effective Communication Guide**

*What Gloria most needed Tony to understand is that she was in a similar situation and she needed his support. She managed the children, cleaned the house, and worked at least twenty hours a week. She often felt stressed and would feel better if she felt connected with Tony. She felt connected with Tony when they talked and when they worked together on something like making dinner, managing the children, or doing chores. Although she also felt connected when they talked, she realized that she didn't always want to talk about her problems either.*

*Gloria began to realize that because Tony was spending all his time in the garage, she was feeling alone and disconnected. She wondered whether he still loved her or if he was having an affair.*

**Let's put this information together and see what Gloria could say to Tony using this communication technique. We will start with Gloria talking to Tony about the situation from his perspective:**

*"Honey, I know you've been working hard and there is a lot of pressure at work to get this project done. I can imagine that at the end of the day you are tired and just want to relax. I know that kids aren't always the most relaxing people to be around and doing chores isn't pleasant either."*

**Then we move on to how the situation is affecting Gloria:**

*"When I'm left alone to manage the children and do the household chores, I feel alone and disconnected from you. Sometimes I even wonder if you are having an affair, and that makes me feel anxious. That's when I get upset with you like I did last week."*

**Finally, Gloria could make a clear and specific request of Tony:**

*I'd like to talk about how I can get the help I need from you and you can get the relaxation you need.*

If we refer to the six guidelines to see how Gloria constructed a way to talk with Tony without blaming him, we see that she was honest and specific, she focused on what she wanted (not on what he did), she was calm, she didn't apologize, and she didn't blame him. She used the three-part strategy to create a script. The script helped her remain focused and calm and kept her from blaming him. Notice she was also mindful that Tony probably had needs of his own, so rather than placing a demand on him, she requested they talk about how each of them could get their individual needs met.

**Now it's your turn. Go to the Worksheet for Communicating Effectively in the appendix to work on how to talk assertively to your partner about something that is upsetting you.**

## Worksheet for Communicating Effectively

This worksheet will help you develop a script for effective communication. There are two parts. The first part helps you figure out how you're feeling and what you believe. The second part helps you create a script you can use to talk with your partner.

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**Describe the situation: What happened and what am I upset about?**

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**What do I want? (What's my truth?)**

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**What do I think will happen if I tell the truth? What scares me the most about telling the truth?**

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**Will this really happen? If I believe it will, how do I know? \*Remember when you are predicting what will happen you are making an assumption.**

## An Effective Communication Guide

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**What are my rights in this situation?**

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**What are my partner's rights?**

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**In this next part you will create a script for communicating assertively and effectively.**

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**What is going on with my partner? What's his situation?**

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**How does it affect me? How do I feel about what happened? What do I need?**

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**What do I want from my partner? What specific action could my partner take to improve the situation?**

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### Using the 3 parts above, write out your script:

# An Effective Communication Guide

## Congratulations!

You have learned a lot about how to communicate more effectively! I suggest trying this out on small issues before tackling a big issue. That way you'll get better at it before you go into a hard conversation where emotions will undoubtedly flare and sticking to your message will be harder.

If you have any questions or just want some emotional support, join my [Facebook group Creating Soulful Relationships \(click here\)](#).

***Be Loved and Be Well,***

*Dr Julie*

**An Effective Communication Guide**





*Dr Julie*  
RELATIONSHIP COACH

## A Different Kind of Life Coach

Hi, I'm Dr. Julie, or just Julie to you, and I coach adults to a better future by helping to turn big, overwhelming relationship problems into a series of small, doable changes. I've dedicated my professional life to this because it's the one thing all my clients talk about, regardless of their reason for working with me initially. It's also something I'm intimately familiar with from my own life experiences.

I'm a Portland psychologist and author of [Loved: Relationship Rules for Women Who Thought They Knew the Rules](#). After two decades working with women and men on their relationships and going through a few struggles of my own, I've created tools and resources for people like you. My work and writing focuses on getting the connection with others you want and deserve, whether it is with an intimate partner, friend, or family member.

**Click the icons to connect!**

