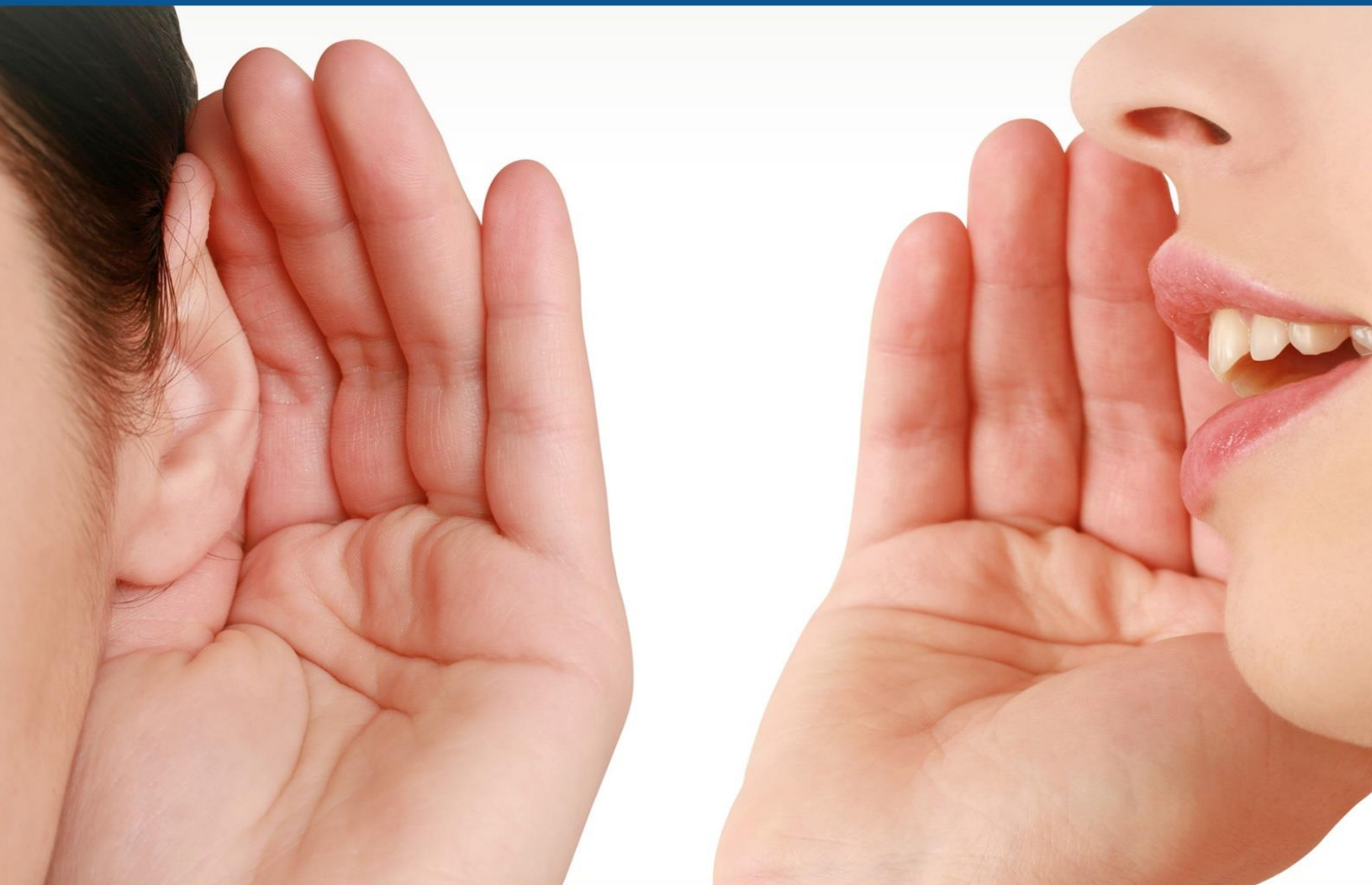


SIMPLE STEPS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION



by Dr. Sarah Allen

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Simple Steps To Improve Communication



Thank you for downloading my booklet Simple Steps To Improve Communication. If you have got this far, I expect you have had some communication difficulties or arguments with someone you care about. When I ask couples or families why they have decided to come to see me for counseling, the most frequent answer I get is because they want to learn how to communicate better with each other.

Our ability to communicate with another person is the bedrock on which good relationships are made. If there are misunderstandings, or perceived slights where none were intended, feelings get hurt. How someone responds can be dependent on many things but often they shut down or flare up their emotions. This, of course, leads to more miscommunication.



Who can talk about their thoughts and feelings to someone who is shut off and not sharing how they feel too, or yelling and angry at you?

In this booklet I am going to discuss five simple steps that can help you to improve your communication with others. These techniques can be used when talking with your partner, family members and friends.



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STEP 1: Set Things Up For A Successful Conversation

I know this is common sense, but if you are going to communicate well, you must set up the right environment to talk. No one can focus if they are in the middle of doing something else, looking at their phone or if the kids are around.

It is also hard to talk productively if either one of you are tired and would rather go to sleep, or feels rushed because they must be somewhere else in 10 minutes.

Ask the person you care about whether this is a good time to talk about something that is important to you and if it is not, say that you would like to set up a time to talk soon.

STEP 2: Try To Stay Calm

It is important to try to stay calm and not launch into a difficult conversation while you are upset or angry. When we get emotional, adrenaline starts racing around our body, we get hot, our heart beats faster and our thoughts race so we can't think straight.

It is very similar way to the way we feel when as when we get anxious about something, the only difference is when adrenaline kicks in during an emotional discussion or argument, your mind is thinking angry thoughts, and you may say or do things you later regret.



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If you feel the adrenaline start to rise, take a break and leave the room for a few minutes so you can do some deep breathing to calm down the adrenaline and come back when you can think straight, and problem solve the issue or talk without being emotionally activated.

Click the image or title below to read my blog post and learn ways that work for you to reduce adrenaline so you can calmly return to your discussion.



7 Simple Grounding Techniques For Calming Down Quickly

If the person who you are talking to says they need to take a 10 minute break to calm down and think straight, let them go and please don't follow them around the house trying to continue the argument. This means no one will get the break they need to feel calm enough to begin the discussion again.

If either one of you takes a break it is important to come back and begin the discussion again fairly soon, as issues that are pushed down and never discussed tend to fester and rear up again.



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STEP 3: Really Listen

Really listening, and not doing anything else apart from focusing on the person who is talking is important because it demonstrates that you are taking the time to concentrate on the conversation you are having with them. It gives the impression that you are present and want to fix a problem, whereas trying to talk while simultaneously looking at your phone gives the message that you don't. Even if you believe you can do both at the same time!

Paying attention and waiting until a person finishes speaking without butting in, also shows that you are willing to try to understand their point of view.

So What Is Active Listening?

Active listening is a way of taking turns to listen and speak to each other in a way that shows you are paying attention. Even though you might think you are in the right, being prepared to listen and compromise means you can understand why your partner is feeling the way they do, and they can also hear why you feel the way you do. It is much more likely to bring compromise and problem-solving rather than argument.



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How Do You Do Active Listening?

You listen to the point the other person is making, then you restate, in your own words, what the other person has said.

Why Is That Important?

- It's a check on whether your understanding is correct and that you are not jumping to conclusions.
- It demonstrates that you are listening and that you are interested in and concerned about how they are feeling.
- It shows that you intend to hear and understand his or her point of view, even if you don't agree with it.





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One of the most useful ways I have found to show people the technique of active listening is by using a very well-known couples therapy technique called the Talking Stick. It can be any object really, and I typically call it the Talking Pen because there is usually a pen nearby.

This Is How The Talking Pen Technique Works

Person A goes first and they get to hold the Talking Pen. The person NOT holding the pen (**Person B**) is silent, must not interrupt and agrees to really listens to what **Person A** has to say. Because our attention spans aren't very long, I suggest sticking to one point at a time.

When they have finished their point, **Person A** gives the Talking Pen to the listener (**Person B**) and they summarize what they just heard **Person A** say. If **Person B** has misunderstood what they are trying to convey, **Person A** takes back the pen and tries to say their point in another way. When they have finished, **Person B** then has the Talking Pen again and summarizes what they understood this time.

Continue this way until both **A & B** in agreement with what **Person A** has to say about what they feel the issue is.



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I know you might feel silly doing this at first, everyone does, but holding The Talking Pen is a helpful visual way to see who is supposed to be talking which reduces interruptions. It is also a good way to diffuse the anger out of a situation, especially with teens, and once you get the hang of taking turns at active listening you won't need the talking pen anymore.

Here is a simple example of the Talking Pen Technique in action:

A: When you are running really late and won't be home at your usual time, if you don't call me to let me know, I worry that something has happened to you and I feel angry because I start thinking that you don't think I'm important enough to bother calling.

B: You want me to let you know where I am all the time, and you worry when I am out of your sight.

A: No, I want you to call to let me know if you are running late when you know I am waiting for you as I don't start other things or go out because I think you are going to be back any minute. When you are very late, I start imagining you are in an accident.

B: When you are waiting for me, and I am running late you would like me to call or text you so you can decide to do something else and not worry that something terrible has happened to me.

A: Yes.



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Next, once **Person A** has expressed how they feel and **Person B** has shown that they really heard what the issue is and how it has made **A** feel, **Person B** holds the **Talking Pen** and responds with how they feel about the issue. By the end of this exercise both people understand how the other person is feeling.

This example used here is very simplistic and easily solved by **Person B** texting when he is going to be more than 15 minutes late. Typically, problems are more complex but by making sure you break down complex issues into no more than 1 or 2 points at a time (you can always come back to it and if you have used this calm way of talking about issues the idea of coming back for more discussions won't be so onerous) you can move on the most important part, problem-solving.

WHY IS ACTIVE LISTENING SO IMPORTANT?

Arguments often go on and on, with no one listening to what the other is saying. Because both people want to get their opinion across, they focus on talking and not listening.

You can't problem-solve if you don't really understand the problem but Active Listening helps you really understand how your partner feels.



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STEP 4: Use “I” Language

Did you notice how **Person A** in the previous example talked about the issue they were upset about? Here is it again so you don’t have to scroll back.

A: *When you are running really late and won’t be home at your usual time, if you don’t call me to let me know, **I worry** that something has happened to you, or **I feel angry** because **I start to feel** that you don’t think I’m important enough to bother calling.*

Person A used something called “I” language to describe her feelings. If you say emotion statements using “I” instead of “You”, you make the issue about yourself and your feelings, not about what your partner has done wrong. By doing this they will feel less criticized.

Think about how you would feel if someone said to you:

“You are always late; you don’t care I am sitting here worrying if you got hurt!”



You might feel verbally attacked or criticized and rather than listening to what the other person has to say, you might defend yourself about why you’re late or tell them they shouldn’t worry so much.



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When people feel criticized, they stop listening and start defending their behavior or attack back. Or perhaps they shut down emotionally and do not talk at all.

None of these are helpful in resolving difficult conversations.

Typically, when someone uses a “You” statement when they are talking about something that is causing them a strong negative emotion, it sparks defensiveness because the person they are talking to typically feel attacked and criticized.

If someone uses a less accusatory “I” statements about how they feel, the person they are talking to will be more likely to be open to discussing things and make changes to resolve the issue.



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Steps 1 through 4 of this booklet can help you:

1. Set things to up so you can have a good conversation to identify the issue and how you both feel about it.
2. Teaches you ways to calm down when you get angry so you can come back to discuss things rationally.
3. Is a technique to really listen to each other to get to the root of the problem.
4. Showed you how to speak to each other in a respectful way.

These four steps all lead to the final step which is to resolve the issue!

STEP 5: Problem-Solve To Find A Solution

Most relationship arguments are variations of the same old problem and because people never come up with a specific agreement of how to resolve anything, the same problem comes up again and again in different guises.

So how do you make problems go away?

I think it is important to try to stick to focusing on one problem at a time and try not to bring up past hurts or other topics because doing that does not solve the problem, it just heats up everyone's emotions when you start bringing up previous arguments or occasions they hurt your feelings.



Why is Problem Solving So Important?

If you are having an argument where neither person is listening to the other, both walk away hurt and with the issue unresolved.

A problem-solving discussion which focuses on compromises tends to work much better and also stops the same argument happening over and over again.

The problem-solving technique is useful for relationship conflict but is also effective in working out a problem you might be wrestling with yourself.

First, identify the problem/s (using Steps 1 – 4 discussed in this booklet) and if it is more than 1 problem, decide to focus on one at a time and which issue is the most important one to start with.

Second, brainstorm all the possible ways you could deal with the problem.

It doesn't matter how silly a solution may sound, throw it in there, be creative and come up with as many experimental solutions as you can between you.



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Third, look at your list of possible solutions and weed out the suggestions that neither of you are unwilling to try or are impractical. You will hopefully be left with 3 – 5 possible solutions to try.

Finally, take one solution that you both agree on, or two solutions (one choice from each person so it's fair) and test out the solution for an agreed upon length of time. It is good to follow up with each other after a few days of trying to deal with the issue using the new solution. That way you can see how each of you is feeling about it and if necessary, use the same steps to adjust or even try out another solution from your list.

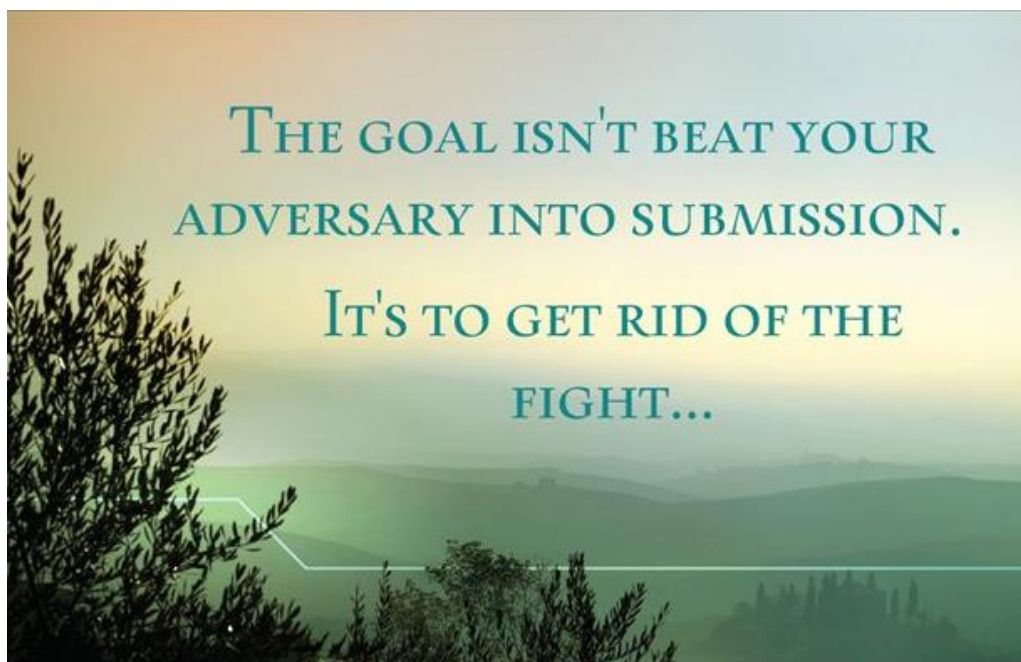


The goal of problem solving is to find a way of changing the way you do something that you can both stick with. It will usually involve a compromise to get to a solution where you both feel you are getting what you need, at least in part.



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By tackling disagreements in a good way, you can get rid of the fight rather than beating down on your loved one until only you “win”.



There are other ways to improve relationships but working on your communication skills and using my 5 Simple Steps can help you resolve conflict without one person feeling they have given in to the other which in the end breeds resentment.

The 5 Simple Steps I have discussed in this booklet work well with couples, but they are also effective with conflict issues between family members too. The steps can be simplified so even young children can understand the concepts. They are particularly useful for resolving parent/teen arguments as everyone wants to be heard and for their needs to be met.



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How CBT Helps Relationship Counseling

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, commonly referred to as CBT, is a type of therapy modality that has gained prominence for its effectiveness in addressing a wide array of psychological issues, including those that arise in relationships by helping couples understand and alter detrimental thought patterns and behaviors.

Understanding Relationship Issues

Relationships, while incredibly rewarding, inevitably come with their fair share of challenges. Couples may encounter communication breakdowns, trust issues, conflicting values, and emotional disconnects. Central to many of these problems are ingrained negative thought patterns and behaviors that may unconsciously drive wedges between partners.

CBT Techniques for Relationship Counseling

1. Identifying Negative Thought Patterns

CBT helps couples recognize the automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) that can negatively impact their interactions. These thoughts often include assumptions or predictions about partner behavior or the relationship's end. In CBT, therapists guide couples to identify and challenge these ANTs and replace them with more balanced and constructive thoughts.

Example: A partner might habitually think, "They don't care about my needs," which could be reframed to "They may not understand my needs, and I could communicate with them more clearly."

2. Behavior Modification

Relationships can suffer when negative behaviors become the norm. Through CBT, partners learn to acknowledge their individual roles in unhealthy patterns and work towards establishing positive ways of interacting. This could involve practicing active listening, expressing themselves assertively but respectfully, and handling conflict with poise.



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Example: A couple might make a commitment to avoid stonewalling during disagreements and instead use "I" statements to convey their feelings.

3. Emotion Regulation

Managing emotions within a relationship is not always easy. CBT equips individuals with tools to better understand their emotional responses and to develop appropriate coping mechanisms—important skills for maintaining a harmonious relationship.

Example: Learning and performing breathing exercises when feeling overwhelmed and taking a break from discussions until calm can help prevent emotionally charged outbursts.



If you would like to read a more in-depth article about Cognitive Therapy (CBT), please click the image or visit <https://drsarahallen.com/what-is-cbt/>

I really hope that the information I have shared in this booklet and in my many blog posts has been of help to you! Unfortunately, my professional license doesn't allow me to offer personalized advice by email which is why I like to write blog posts and booklets so I can share information with people who live outside of the states I am licensed in. You can read many more articles about all my areas of specialty on my blog www.dr.sarahallen.com/blog or join me on social media to read more psychologically based tips on how to lead the life you want to live.

Sarah



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About The Author



Dr. Sarah Allen is originally from England, but she has been living and raising her family in the Chicago, IL area for over two decades.

She completed her psychology doctorate at Southampton University, England, where she trained in a psychotherapy treatment called cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). CBT is short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including anxiety, chronic pain, depression, eating /weight issues, relationship problems and PTSD.

Her skills and many years of experience allow her to get to the root of problems quickly and show you practical ways to feel more in control of your life.

There are multiple ways we hold ourselves back from happiness. Sarah empowers her clients with the tools necessary to deal with the stress that life and relationships bring, both in the present and for when they show up again in the future.

For more information about Dr. Allen's services please visit her website at <https://www.drSarahallen.com>

or contact her to discuss working together on 847 791-7722 or email drsarahallen@drsarahallen.com.

Please note that Dr. Allen's professional license only allows her to work with people who live in Illinois & Florida USA & the UK.

