



Wendy Trainor
communication and healing

Creating safety: Rules for discussing potentially “hot” topics

Establishing rules – techniques and strategies for dealing with conflict in marriage – can be helpful for both men and women. They can increase a couple’s ability to deal with avoidance, escalation, withdrawal and invalidation in ways that protect intimacy and promote growth in relationships.

What we have learned is that “in the heat of the moment,” even those of us who have learned these skills well, will revert back to our more dysfunctional habits.

I suggest couples be mindful of two main rules when they fight:

1. Do not call your partner names. The sting of hurtful things said remains long after the fight has ended.
2. Do not threaten to leave in anger. This destabilizes the other person and is really a way of “fighting dirty”.

When you come back together to attempt to repair your relationship after a fight, you may be more able to follow these guidelines.

The Speaker-Listener Technique *

The speaker-listener technique is a method for slowing down communication and providing structure and safety when the issues to be discussed are sensitive.

Rules:

1. *The speaker has the floor.* Many couples use a real object to represent the “floor”: a piece of carpet, a pen or pencil. If you do not have the “floor,” you are the listener.
2. *Share the floor.* One person has the floor to start and may say a number of things. You switch roles as the floor changes hands.
3. *No problem solving.* When you use this technique, the focus is on having good discussions, not trying to come to solutions prematurely.

Rules for the speaker:

1. *Speak for yourself. Don’t try to be a mind reader.* Talk about your own thoughts, feelings and concerns, not your perceptions of the Listener’s point of view or motives.
2. *Do not go on and on.* You’ll have plenty of opportunity to say all you need to say. To help the Listener listen accurately, it will be very important to confine what you say to brief, manageable statements.
3. *Stop and let the Listener paraphrase.* If the paraphrase wasn’t quite accurate, you should politely restate what was not heard in the way it was intended to be heard. Your goal is to help the Listener understand your point of view.

Rules for the listener:

1. *Paraphrase what you hear.* Briefly repeat back what you heard the Speaker say, using your own words, and make sure that you understand what was being said. If the paraphrase is not quite right (which happens often), the Speaker should gently clarify the point being made until the message sent is clearly the message received.
2. *Focus on the Speaker’s message. Don’t rebut.* In the Listener’s role, you do not offer your opinion or thoughts. This is the hardest part of being a good Listener. If you are upset about what your partner says, you need to edit out any response you may want to make and pay attention to what your partner is saying.

A good paraphrase will often include feedback about the emotional content that is being expressed. Suppose that your spouse said to you: "I had a horrible day. My boss got on my case about how I handled the last project. Ugh!" Any of the following may be an excellent paraphrase:

"Sounds like you've had a tough day."

"So, your boss was critical of how you handled that project and really got onto you about it."

"Bad day, huh?"

When you show respect and listen well, you create an atmosphere of safety where you are able to deal constructively with emotional issues. A good discussion can lead to a clear sense that you are working together against the problem.

* These concepts are from: *Fighting for Your Marriage* by H. Markman, S. Stanley and S. Bloomberg

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