

# Communicating for Couples



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## Behaviours That Interfere With Open Communication For Couples

**Blaming:** If you didn't... When you.... I did that because you....

**Defending:** Yes, but.... I do that because.... I wouldn't do that if...

**Denying:** That's not what I meant. That's not what I said.

**'Fixing' the problem prematurely:** Making suggestions before feelings are expressed.

**Rejecting another's feelings:** I don't believe you. That's not how you feel. What you really mean is....

**Shutting down:** Withdrawing; Walking away.

**Distraction:** Changing the subject – I know, but you...



## Getting Started

The average couple spends just twelve minutes a day talking to each other, making it much more difficult to maintain a close, loving relationship. What's more most of those 12 minutes are focused on organising practical tasks, such as planning meals, running the household or managing childcare.

Little wonder then that one of the most common issues relationship counsellors encounter is lack of communication. Often it's not because of a lack of trying. Couples may desperately want to communicate in a meaningful way, but somehow they seem to have forgotten how to make it happen. Sometimes it's because they have forgotten how to truly listen to each other, and at other times it's because anger, anxiety or past hurts get in the way. This can lead to both members of the couple feeling frustrated, lonely and alienated.

Effective communication is important to couples on many levels. It allows partners to exchange messages about love and other emotions, as well as maintaining bonds of affection and understanding. Effective communication requires practicing the skills of listening and the clear expression of thoughts and feelings. It is much more than talking, as communication consists of verbal messages (what you say), contextual issues (how you say it), emotional tone (why you say it), and even non-verbal cues (what your body says – facial expression, body posture, and so on).

Couples communicate well when:

- they feel safe
- they feel they are not going to be judged negatively
- they are not afraid of being punished or attacked
- they are not going to be made to feel guilty
- they know they will not be told they are wrong
- they believe they are going to be understood
- they know that what they say is not going to be distorted and/or misinterpreted

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- they know that what they say will not be used against them later
- they are not afraid their partner will withdraw from them
- they trust that what they are going to say will be kept confidential
- they know there is no chance a talk will go on for hours, perhaps escalating into a painful argument that they don't know how to stop or make better
- the listener does not respond with solutions (a major mistake couples make while talking is trying to find a solution to a problem when a solution is not what is needed or wanted or before the real problem has been clearly identified.)

In a couple relationship, each person wants a chance to speak without interruption. When one interrupts the other, the first speaker's train of thought gets interrupted and the second speaker has already stopped listening. The first speaker then struggles harder to get 'airtime' to express him or herself. If interrupted too many times, a person may give up trying to talk at all. When you allow your partner to talk without interruption, you encourage him or her to express themselves more fully and on a deeper level. When each partner is allowed to fully and deeply express themselves, couples feel a greater sense of emotional connection.

### Healthy couples stay emotionally connected to each other.

Often one partner is more of a talker than the other. This is not a fault of either and is not necessarily a problem to be fixed. In fact, such differences can complement each other. On the other hand, talkers may need to learn not to repeat themselves and to be more comfortable with silence. The quieter partner may need to learn to speak up and take 'airtime', especially when it's offered. Talkers tend to say something to their partner or ask a question and then immediately start talking again. Quieter partners tend to take too long to respond, unconsciously inviting the talker to start talking again. Each person needs to change a little for communication to improve.

## Active Listening

Listening is the single most important communication skill as it is the best way to understand your partner. A good listener does more than just hear words; they interpret emotions and behaviours, and respond appropriately.

A good listener pays attention to his or her partner's words and feelings, the action of which sends a clear message: 'You are important to me'. It shows caring and increases the likelihood that your partner will continue sharing their feelings. Listening to another person in this way is often known as 'Active listening'.

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Active listening is a powerful communication skill. By reflecting back to your partner what they said, you demonstrate to your partner that you heard more than the words they used – you show that you understand their thoughts and feelings and heard their point of view. To merely say to your partner 'I understand'. does not prove that you understand, Active listening does. To be an effective Active listener you must momentarily put aside your own point of view, put aside your own thoughts and feelings, let go of the concept of right and wrong, and listen with your heart. Active listening is far more than hearing the words and repeating them back to your partner; it is letting your partner know you understood their thoughts, feelings and related actions.

**Active listening requires having the patience to wait your turn.**

Each partner wants to be understood by the other. Often what happens is each person tries so hard to get their own point of view across that they cannot hear their partner's point of view. That is, each one tries so hard to get understood that they do not understand their partner. As a result, talking becomes an argument over who is right and who is wrong. Then, arguments escalate into unproductive and hurtful fights.

Active listening is different. Active listening demonstrates to your partner that you understand them or at least you are trying hard to. It demonstrates your interest and effort to connect on a deeper level. When you truly want to know your partner on a deeper level, your partner will sense it. Then, talking or discussing will not escalate into fighting, although it may get emotionally charged. Learning Active listening will lead you to know your partner's inner world. This in turn will lead to your partner wanting to know your inner world.

**Getting to know your partner's inner world for a healthier relationship.**

When you know someone very well, it's easy to assume that you know what the other person means, even without really listening. Active listening means listening as if for the first time – setting aside everything you think you know about your partner and what they are going to say, and listening to what they *actually* say.

**How to Listen Actively:**

First of all – for now, put your own point of view aside. 'Putting aside' does not mean your view is unimportant, you are just 'putting it to one side' while you are hearing your partner's point of view.

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When your partner is finished speaking, reflect back to them his or her point of view by:

- putting to words
- what they think and believe
- what they feel (emotion)
- what behaviours they have done, are doing or want to do
- what they want and need
- what they value
- what they feel is important that you know about them
- what they want you to understand.

It helps if you start the reflection with ‘You.....’”

Examples:

Belief: You believe couples that have a date night once a week have better relationships.

Emotion: (verbal) You want me to know how lonely you are in our relationship.

Emotion: (non-verbal) Your tears are letting me know how hurt you feel about this.

Behaviour: You want me to know that you go out with your friends because I’m busy but you would rather spend time with me.

Want: You want to spend more quality time together and not fight so much.

Value: You really value honesty in our relationship.

Importance: You really want me to know how hard you are trying.

Understanding: You understand how busy I am at work and you are doing your best to cope with it.

While listening show interest, respect and openness.

Make eye contact, give your undivided attention, and be physically open.

Avoid: Negative body language: arms folded, rolling eyes, snorting, looking away, or grimacing. Trying to 'fix it' or otherwise finding a solution.

While reflecting back make a genuine effort and be respectful.

In a warm tone of voice, reflect back just what you heard.

Avoid: Getting caught up in the details or content. Stay focused on your partner's viewpoint and emotions instead.

Putting your own 'spin' on what your partner is saying when your point of view is different. This can be done non-verbally by being sarcastic, emphasizing specific words or sounding doubtful or blaming.

Reflecting back more than what was actually said.



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## Talk, Listen and Reflect Exercise

The aim of this exercise is to improve communication and emotional connection by:

Changing the timing and sequencing of talking to each other.

Shifting from a superficial level to a deeper level of interaction.

Stop focusing on solutions or 'fixing it'.

Learn the skill of Active listening.

Experience what it is like to have your partner reflective listen to you.

Once you have tried this exercise a couple of times, you might like to adapt the structure to suit your unique couple relationship.

### Step 1

Plan something simple yet fun to do after the 30 minutes of the exercise is up. Choose something that you both enjoy.

### Step 2

- Person A talks for 10 minutes (Use all of allotted time).
- Person B listens silently (clarify only if necessary).

### Step 3

- Person B talks for 10 minutes (Use all of allotted time).
- Person A listens silently (clarify only if necessary).

### Step 4

- Then B reflects back to A her thoughts, feelings and actions about what A talked about. (5 minutes). (No reactions/opinions/solutions).

### Step 5

- Then A reflects back what he/she heard B talk about. (5 minutes). (No reactions/opinions/solutions).

## Step 6

Now do something entirely different (the activity you agreed on in Step 1. Do not talk about or discuss what either of you said.

Learning any new skill requires practice. At first communicating with Active Listening might feel awkward and mechanical. However, as you learn the skills, you will be able to 'make them your own' and use them more naturally. With practice, Active Listening can become spontaneous, natural and part of your own unique way of communicating.

Often no solutions are needed when couples fully hear and understand each other. When couples feel good about each other often problems melt away. Knowing each other's thoughts and feelings on an issue, allows the couple to shift into problem solving if needed.

Good listening can be the key to defusing current problems as well as preventing problems that might arise in future.



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# Basic Skills of Active Listening

## An Attitude of Respect and Acceptance

An accepting attitude involves respecting others as separate and unique human beings, but this does not mean that you agree with everything they say. However, you are secure enough in yourself to respect what they say as their version of reality.

## *Barriers to an Accepting Attitude*

Sometimes we do not really listen to what other people are saying. This may be because we are preoccupied with our own concerns and worries, or because we are feeling anxious for some other reason. The stronger you are emotionally, the less need there is for you to use barriers and filters, so the more open you are to others. Other barriers may be related to the physical environment.

Common barriers include:

**Anxiety-evoking feelings.** If your partner is expressing feelings that you find difficult to take on board; for instance, apathy, depression or anger, it may be difficult to listen openly.

**Anxiety-evoking situations.** The following are some common situations where you might find it difficult to concentrate on what your partner is saying:

- When you are unwell or very tired.
- Being under stress from worries in your personal or work life.
- When you are distracted, perhaps trying to care for children or watching TV.

**Trigger words, phrases and attitudes.** Trigger words and phrases raise a 'red flag' for you as an individual. Each individual has his or her own emotionally charged triggers. Trigger phrases can also be 'you' messages, for example, 'You screwed up,' 'You don't understand' or 'You're not helping me enough.'

**Emotional exhaustion and burnout.** If you are emotionally exhausted it is very difficult to focus meaningfully on another person's needs. You may also be less accepting and understanding than you might be at other times.

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Freudenberger defines burnout as:

*To deplete oneself. To exhaust one's physical and mental resources. To wear oneself out by excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by one's self or by the values of society (1980).*

## Tune into Your Partner's Perspective

### Send Good Body Messages

Your body messages as a listener are important when both you and others speak. To be a rewarding person with whom to talk you need to convey your receptiveness and interest physically. This is sometimes referred to as **attending behaviour**. For example, imagine that as you talk to your partner, you are also gazing out of the window. Your partner is unlikely to feel that you are really listening to him or her or that you are interested in what they are saying.

The following are some of the main body messages that demonstrate interest and attention. In varying degrees, they provide non-verbal **rewards** to the child for talking.

**Availability.** People sometimes send out the message that they are unavailable. You may be overworked or preoccupied. You may be poor at letting your availability or limits on it be known. Intentionally or unintentionally you may send message that create distance. Send clear messages to your partner and others about availability and access.

**Relaxed and open body posture.** A relaxed body posture, without slumping or slouching, contributes to the message that you are receptive. If you sit in a tense and uptight fashion, the other person may consciously or intuitively feel that you are too bound up in your personal agendas and unfinished business to be fully accessible to them.

How you use your arms and legs can enhance or detract from an open body posture. For example, crossed arms can be perceived as barriers, sometimes crossed legs can too. Research suggests that postural similarity, where two people take up mirror image postures (mirroring) is a sign of liking which may be unconsciously picked up by other people.

**Slight forward lean.** Whether you lean forwards, backwards or sideways is another aspect of your body posture. If you lean too far forward you look odd and the other person may feel you are invading their personal space. However, a slight forward lean can suggest interest and support.

**Good use of gaze and eye contact.** Gaze means looking at people in the area of their faces. Good gaze skills indicate your interest and enable you to receive important facial messages. Women are usually more attentive than men on all measures of gaze. Gaze can give you cues about when to stop listening and start responding. However, the main cues used in synchronising conversation are verbal and voice messages rather than body messages. Good eye contact skills involve looking in the other person's direction so that you allow the possibility of your eyes meeting reasonably often.

Staring threatens the other person: they may feel dominated or seen through. Alternatively if you look down or away too often you may seem tense or bored.

**Appropriate facial expressions.** Your face is perhaps your main vehicle for sending body messages. Ekman (1972) identified seven main expressions of emotion: happiness, interest, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, and disgust or contempt. Much facial information is conveyed through the mouth and the eyebrows. A friendly, relaxed facial expression, including a smile, usually demonstrates interest. However, as the other person talks, your facial expressions need to show that you are tuned into what they say.

**Appropriate gestures.** Perhaps the head nod is the most common gesture in listening: small ones to show continued attention, larger and repeated ones to indicate agreement. Other negative gestures include: fidgeting with pens or pencils, hands clenched together, finger drumming, fiddling with your hair, your hand over your mouth, ear, tugging and scratching yourself, which all send the message that you are distracted and not very interested in what is going on.

## Using 'I' Messages

An effective way to communicate with your partner is through 'I' messages—statements that describe your feelings and explain how you are affected by your partner's behaviour without 'blaming'. 'I' messages can express emotions in a way that is not threatening as they focus on the speaker's feelings and not on blaming the partner.

'I' messages are quite different from a 'you' message. 'You' messages are often interpreted as placing blame and judging the other person based on their behavior. 'You' messages often trigger defensiveness or hostility in the other person and tend to increase conflict. Think about how you feel when you hear "*You always...*" or "*You never....*"

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## The Mechanics of 'I' Messages

'I' messages let your partner know how you feel and why you feel that way. They have three parts:

- a statement about the speaker's feelings
- a statement about the behavior that caused the feeling
- the reason for the speaker's feelings.

## Practice Using 'I' Statements

*'I feel upset when you criticize my parents because my parents are so important to me.'*

This 'I' statement follows the three steps outlined above:

1. It describes the feeling: 'I feel upset'.
2. It describes the behaviour: 'when you criticize my parents'.
3. It identifies the reason: 'because my parents are so important to me.'



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## Communication Styles

As we have seen communication plays a critical role in maintaining closeness and intimacy in a relationship. In this section we explore differences in relating style that can create a barrier to effective communication, and also look at ways of overcoming these barriers.

**Expressiveness** - One partner may be more expressive than the other. Expressive people like to share emotions and feelings. They look for real-time feedback or responses. A less expressive person may find this uncomfortable or invasive.

**Task- or Fact-oriented** – Some people seldom talk about feelings, and may use facts instead of emotions, as in: "I feel that I'm not making enough money." This person is looking for acceptance of his/her point of view, not emotions.

**When Opposites Attract** - These opposite styles might attract each other initially and sometimes they are complimentary. However, over time, as the relationship becomes more complicated, these differences can become problematic.

**Getting to the Heart of the Matter** - It is important to try to understand each other's communication style and respond accordingly. Communicating details about our internal lives is an important part of an intimate relationship. Speaking and listening at this level is a way to feel connected.

**In tough times, we can be overwhelmed with worries and responsibilities.** Time together as a couple is often the last thing on our minds as we deal with the hassles of daily life. Although you may be busy, stressed, and worried, take the time to focus on your partners' needs and spend quality time together without interruption. Even a few minutes a day talking about what has occurred can be a relief from stress. Consider whether difficult or problem-solving discussions could be reserved for other times when you and your partner are not tired or distracted.

**You may need to be the one who starts conversations.** Don't wait for your partner to bring a subject up, and remember that your partner can't read your mind. If there is something you want to talk about, it's up to you to start the conversation. You can find many ways to open the door for communication if you are sensitive to changes in your partner's feelings and needs.

### Finding Time to Talk

- Spend time talking with limited interruptions.
- Make a date to talk to your partner.
- Plan at least one routine family time each week.
- Notice those times when your partner seems to have something he/she needs to talk about.
- Talk instead of watching TV.
- Talk when you take a walk together.
- Talk while you work together on household chores.
- Talk in the car while traveling to activities.

### Assertiveness

*People who are assertive are more likely to be fulfilled in their work and their lives as they are not afraid to ask for what they want. This attitude also means that they are far more likely to fulfil their potential, both socially and at work. In turn this will lead to them being more satisfied with their lives and so more happy and at ease. They will not be as stressed as others since they have less to be stressed about and live healthier and happier lives.*

*Ben Franks, Life Coach*

Whether in the workplace or in our personal lives, assertiveness brings considerable benefits. Not only does it allow us to build happier and more successful relationships but we are much more able to reach our goals and support others fully.

Dainow and Bailey (1988) describe assertiveness as the art of being confident and having clear, honest and direct communication, whilst respecting other people.

Underman Boggs (2003) identifies four components of assertive behaviour:

1. Being able to say no
2. Asking for what you want
3. The ability to appropriately express thoughts and feelings
4. Being able to initiate, continue and terminate interaction.

Assertiveness is not about personality, scoring points, winning at the expense of others, or manipulating people - all of which are aggressive behaviours. Nor is it associated with inwardly being angry whilst doing nothing, or justifying and apologising - all of which can be seen as passive behaviours.

Assertiveness is about acting positively, being open and honest, listening, expressing feelings and ideas and making decisions. It does not mean always getting what one wants, and that there might be a need for compromise. One person's rights should not be protected at the expense of those of another.

### What Does Assertiveness Look Like?

A person who is assertive can be described as someone who:

- expresses their views clearly and articulately without being aggressive;
- stands up for their own and other people's rights in a reasonable and clear way;
- allows other people a reasonable opportunity to express their opinions without allowing them to dominate a conversation.

We might also add a further more subtle element to the definition of assertiveness:

- having the courage to express one's own feelings, even about difficult issues, in a way which is respectful and honest.

Assertiveness is standing up for your right to be treated fairly. It is expressing your

opinions, needs, and feelings, without ignoring or hurting the opinions, needs, and feelings of others. Because people want to be liked and thought of as 'nice' or 'easy to get along with', they often keep their opinions to themselves, especially if those opinions conflict with other people's. But this sometimes leads to being taken advantage of by people who are not as nice or considerate.

Assertive behaviour includes:

- starting, changing, or ending conversations;
- sharing feelings, opinions, and experiences with others;
- making requests and asking for favours;
- refusing others' requests if they are too demanding;
- questioning rules or traditions that don't make sense or don't seem fair;
- addressing problems or things that bother you;
- being firm so that your rights are respected;
- expressing positive emotions;
- expressing negative emotions.

### Being Assertive

You can begin to behave more assertively by trying out the following in your approach to others by:

- stating your position clearly and telling others how their behaviour affects you;
- being clear and to the point, avoiding detailed accounts which may confuse the listener;
- taking ownership and responsibility for what you say by using 'I' statements;
- making distinction between fact and opinion;
- offering suggestions;
- being constructive in criticism;
- questioning to clarify and discover other opinions;

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being aware of your non-verbal communications – tone, body language, facial expression and eye contact (Back and Back 1999).

Assertiveness can help us make requests, give and receive praise, disagree with someone and give or receive feedback - all necessary skills in our daily lives. Being able to face these situations with confidence can lead to reduced stress and increased self-confidence.

Other assertive behaviours that may be helpful to put into practice are:

- writing down what you are going to say and taking time to rehearse it;
- being honest with yourself and others;
- actively listening to others;
- being willing to compromise and negotiate;
- thinking before you speak – you may need time to consider your answer;
- repeating your response, rather than being diverted into an argument;
- admitting a mistake;
- having the confidence to change your mind;
- praising others.

### Saying 'No'

Many people find it difficult to say 'no' to requests from others, despite the impact that saying 'yes' can have on our work lives or stress levels. When someone asks you to do something, take your time to answer. Then, when responding, consider the following:

- use 'I' to show you are taking responsibility;
- be direct - ensure you use the word 'no';
- avoid lengthy explanations and apologies;
- acknowledge that the other person may be upset by your refusal;
- suggest alternatives;

- repeat your refusal until the person acknowledges it;
- be aware of body language and make it congruent with the verbal message.

Many people are concerned that if they assert themselves others will think of their behaviour as aggressive. But there is a difference between being assertive and aggressive. Dickson (1982), explains that assertive behaviour attacks the problem, not another person, ensuring that the reasonable rights of all involved are respected.

Assertive people state their opinions, while still being respectful of others. Aggressive people attack or ignore others' opinions in favour of their own. Passive people don't state their opinions at all

### Identifying Your Communication Style

It is helpful to bear in mind that our relating styling includes both verbal and non-verbal elements, as well as our thinking patterns.

### *Characteristics of Passive Communication*

#### **definition:**

- Not expressing honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, allowing others to violate your rights. Can also mean expressing thoughts and feelings in an apologetic, self-effacing way - so that others easily disregard them.
- Violating your own rights.
- Also sometimes showing a subtle lack of respect for the other person's ability to take disappointments, shoulder some responsibility, or handle their own problems.

#### **verbal characteristics:**

- long rambling sentences
- beat-around-the-bush
- hesitant, filled with pauses
- frequent throat clearing

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- apologise inappropriately in a soft unsteady voice
- using phrases such as “ it wouldn’t be too much trouble...
- voice often dull and monotonous
- tone may be sing-song or whining
- over-soft or over-warm
- quiet often dropping away
- frequent justifications, e.g., ‘ wouldn’t normally say anything, but’
- apologies, e.g., ‘terribly sorry to bother you...’
- qualifiers, e.g., ‘only my opinion’ or ‘might be wrong’
- self-dismissal, e.g., ‘not important’ or ‘doesn’t really matter’
- self put-downs, e.g., ‘useless... hopeless’ or ‘know me...’

**non-verbal characteristics:**

- averting gaze
- looking down
- posture can be slouched
- wringing hands
- winking or laughing when expressing anger
- covering mouth with hand
- crossing arms for protection
- ghost smiles when expressing anger or being criticised
- raising eyebrows in anticipation
- jaw trembling
- lip biting.

**thinking style:**

- 'don't count'
- feelings, needs and thoughts are less important than yours
- 'will think badly of me or not like me'
- 'If I say no I may upset someone, then I will be responsible for upsetting them'

**payoff:**

- Praised for being selfless, a good sport
- Rarely blamed if things go wrong because you haven't usually shown initiative
- Others will protect and look after you
- Avoid, postpone or hide conflict so in short term can reduce anxiety

**cost:**

- build up of stress and anger that can explode in an aggressive manner
- Others often make unreasonable demands of you
- Can get stuck in relationships that aren't healthy and find it very difficult to change
- Restrict self into other people's image of a loveable good person
- When repressing anger and frustration this diminishes other more positive feelings in you
- Loss of self esteem

***Aggressive Behaviour*****definition:**

- You stand up for your personal rights and express your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way which is usually inappropriate and always violates the rights of the other person.

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- People often feel devastated by an encounter with an aggressive person.
- Superiority is maintained by putting others down.
- When threatened you attack.

**verbal characteristics:**

- Strident, sarcastic or condescending voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Often abrupt, clipped
- Often fast
- Emphasising blaming words
- Firm voice
- Tone sarcastic, cold, harsh
- Voice can be strident, often shouting, rising at end
- Use of threats, e.g., 'better watch out' or 'don't you dare'
- Put downs, e.g., 'got to be kidding...' or 'be so stupid'
- Evaluative comments, emphasising concepts such as: 'should' and 'must'
- Boastfulness, e.g., 'haven't got problems like yours'
- Opinions expressed as fact, e.g., 'want to behave like that' or 'a useless way to do it'
- Threatening questions, e.g., 'haven't you finished that yet?' or 'why on earth did you do it like that?'

**non-verbal characteristics:**

- Intruding into the other person's space
- Staring the other person out

- Gestures such as pointing, fist clenching
- Striding around impatiently
- Leaning forward or over
- Crossing arms (unapproachable)
- Smiling may become sneering
- Scowling when angry
- Jaws set firm

**thinking style:**

- 'get you before you have a chance to get me'
- 'out for number one'
- 'world is a battle ground and I am out to win'

**payoffs:**

- You get others to do your bidding
- Things tend to go your way
- You are less vulnerable
- You like the feeling of being in control
- Release of tension
- You feel powerful

**cost:**

- Your behaviour will create enemies and resentment in those around you
- This can result in a sense of paranoia and fear
- If you are always trying to control others it can be difficult for you to relax

- Your relationships will tend to be based on negative emotions and are likely to be unstable
- Aggressive people tend to feel inferior deep down and try to compensate for that by putting others down
- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Decreasing self confidence and self esteem.

### *Assertive Behaviour*

#### **definition:**

- A way of communicating our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs in an open, honest manner without violating the rights of others.
- It is an alternative to being aggressive where we abuse other people' rights, and passive where we abuse our own rights

#### **verbal characteristics:**

- Firm, relaxed voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Steady even pace
- Tone is middle range, rich and warm
- Sincere and clear
- Not too loud or too quiet
- Voice appropriately loud for the situation
- 'I' statements ('I like' 'I want', 'I don't like' that are brief and to the point
- Co-operative phrases, e.g., 'are your thoughts on this'
- Emphatic statements of interest, e.g., 'I would like to'

- Distinction between fact and opinion
- Constructive criticism without blame, e.g., 'I feel irritated when you interrupt me'
- Seeking others opinions, e.g., 'does this fit in with your ideas'
- Willingness to explore other solutions, e.g., 'can we get around this problem?'

### **non-verbal characteristics:**

- Receptive listening
- Direct eye contact without staring
- Erect, balanced, open body stance
- Open hand movements
- Smiling when pleased
- Frowning when angry
- Features steady and jaw relaxed

### **thinking style:**

- 'I won't allow you to take advantage of me and I won't attack you for being who you are'

### **payoffs:**

- The more you stand up for yourself and act in a manner you respect, the higher your self esteem
- Your chances of getting what you want out of life improve greatly
- Expressing yourself directly at the time means that resentment doesn't build up
- If you are less driven by the needs of self-protection and less preoccupied with self consciousness then you can see, hear and love others more easily

### **cost:**

- Friends/colleagues may have benefited from you being passive and may sabotage your new assertiveness
- You are reshaping beliefs and values you have held since childhood and this can be frightening
- There is no guarantee of outcome
- There is often pain involved in being assertive.

### **Becoming More Assertive**

The first step in becoming more assertive is to take an honest look at yourself and your responses, to see where you currently stand. The answers to the following questions will give you some clues:

- Do you have difficulty accepting constructive criticism?
- Do you find yourself saying 'yes' to requests that you should really say 'no' to, just to avoid disappointing people?
- Do you have trouble voicing a difference of opinion with others?
- Do people tend to feel alienated by your communication style when you do disagree with them?
- Do you feel attacked when someone has an opinion different from your own?

If you answered yes to several of these, you may benefit from developing greater assertiveness skills.

Becoming more assertive involves developing a range of skills and learning to trust in your own judgement and abilities. The first step is to take stock of where you are now and decide where you want to go.

### **Where Are You Now?**

Although we are always living in the present moment, you might be surprised how little we are aware of all that is actually happening. Try the following exercises to test your own level of awareness.

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*Sit quietly for five minutes with your eyes closed. Just focus on listening and notice how many sounds you can hear. Briefly describe your experience. Where you surprised by how much you could hear?*

Before you continue reflect on this experience of listening. How many sounds came into your consciousness as time went on? For instance, you may have become aware of the sound of your heart beating, or of your own breathing; of distant bird song or traffic; or of a clock ticking. These sounds were going on all the time out of your awareness. The pace of modern living makes it hard to be conscious of everything around us and we can be very cut off from the richness of our environment. The next exercises continue this theme.

*Look around the room, noticing the shapes, colour, forms and textures that you can see. Relax your eyes and let things go out of focus. Try to see as a visitor from Mars might see things. The Martian wouldn't know the name or the purpose of anything. He wouldn't be able to make judgements like something being in the right place; dirty or clean; old or new. Try looking at just one object for at least five minutes and notice whether it (or your view of it) changes as time passes.*

*Spend five minutes walking around the room, touching as many shapes and textures as possible. You can do this blindfold if you wish.*

*Now, still with your eyes closed, concentrate on your sense of smell. What does the air smell like? Smell your hand, the wall, the open window, the different objects around you. Describe your experience.*

These exercises were concerned with raising awareness of your senses; now experiment with your mental awareness.

*Sit quietly with a notebook and pen and allow your thoughts to wander. Don't think about anything in particular. Set a timer for ten minutes so that you don't have to worry about the time. Every time a thought comes to you, however trivial, jot it down.*

When the time is up, look over your list and notice the pattern of your thinking. Are your thoughts largely concerned with the past or with the future? Are you judging or criticising yourself or others most of the time? Did your thoughts flit from one thing to another, or did you focus on one main issue? Thoughts can be helpful or hindering; for instance, I could be writing this and thinking, 'Am I going to meet the deadline? Will people understand what I'm saying? Some people are bound to

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disagree with me. When shall I cook dinner?' These thoughts could easily block the flow - it would be wiser just to get on with it and meet any problems if or when they arise.

You have concentrated on your senses and your mind, now is time to focus your attention on your body. Again, sit quietly and take stock of your physical self. Are you aware of any aches and pains? Is your posture straight or slumped? Are your muscles relaxed or tense?

The purpose of all these exercises has been to raise your awareness of your own particular here and now. Awareness of this kind can help us to recognise how we may be restricting our responses and how we can act to change. It can also show us how we are reacting to stress or everyday problems in unhelpful ways, and how we might change that.

Just as we successfully screen out many sights and sounds from our consciousness, so we filter our awareness of the options open to us. For instance, we can immobilise ourselves by avoiding awareness of what we don't like in our present situation. We can tune out our recognition of our own needs and tune into the needs of others.

One solution to this is to be *fully present*, to become aware of our current needs, to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions. It is particularly important to finish situations, or 'tie up loose ends', as otherwise this can block our ability to move on.

This focus on awareness of your own needs isn't as selfish as it sounds - being aware of a need doesn't mean that you automatically have the right to fulfil it at the expense of other people. However, bringing this knowledge into consciousness gives you more control over the way you respond to life. In addition, taking care of your own needs means that you are much more able to care for the needs of others. Coaches often use the example of a plane flight. When passengers first board a plane they are shown how to fit their own oxygen mask should an unexpected emergency occur. The flight attendants always emphasise that parents must place their own masks on before they try to attend to their children. If they do not do so, they might well pass out before they have time to fit their children's masks properly. Parents must attend to their own needs, before they can care effectively for their children. Although everyday situations are rarely life-threatening, the same principle applies. Only by taking care of your own needs can you be fully responsive to, and caring for, your loved ones.

## Effective Negotiating

Most of us use negotiating skills every day, both in our personal life and our working life.

Negotiating successfully with others is fundamental to achieving goals and avoiding stress in many different areas. Each person has his or her own unique view of the world. We are all pursuing our own outcomes and often come into conflict with others who are pursuing their own personal outcomes. Yet we need to find a way to work around this and live together. This is where negotiation can be important. It allows two people who want different things to engage in a joint search for a solution that they hope will leave them both satisfied. This is quite different from a compromise, which will probably leave them both dissatisfied. Sometimes, however, a compromise is the best that can be achieved.

Negotiation is thus central to good communication. In negotiation you aim to get what you want from others by giving them what they want. For effective negotiation to take place both parties must first agree to co-operate in this joint search for a solution. Below are some guidelines for negotiation.

### Before the Negotiation Begins

#### *▮ set your own outcome*

Be clear on both your top and bottom line for agreement - what can you live with, and what do you really want?

Also set your BATNA (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement), in other words what you will do if you cannot agree. Not every negotiation is successful.

#### *▮ set the evidence for your outcome*

What specific evidence do you require to know that you have achieved your outcome? Is it short, medium or long-term?

#### *• prepare yourself*

The quality of your negotiations will depend on your frame of mind at the time. Approach the negotiation with a willingness to understand the viewpoint of the other person - understanding their perspective does not mean that you have to agree with them.

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Do your research and be clear in your own mind about your case.

*▮ maintain your awareness of the other person and a willingness to take on board their point of view*

Use positive body language to indicate that you are receptive to the other person's ideas and willing to co-operate to find a solution.

Establish and maintain rapport. Rapport does not mean that you have to agree with the other person, only that you respect and acknowledge their position.

*▮ ask questions and seek shared understanding*

Find an area of common agreement and build on this.

Unless you can find an area of shared agreement the negotiation is unlikely to be successful. Even if your area of agreement is quite distant from the core issues of the negotiation it is still a valuable starting point.

- *seek congruent agreement*

This means achieving a real, shared understanding rather than a surface agreement where everyone is still in deep disagreement underneath. If the agreement is incongruent it will break down in the long-run.

### After the Negotiation

*▮ summarise*

Summarise the contents of the negotiation and your conclusion. This is sometimes called backtracking. This is an important step because it ensures that you both come away from the discussion with the same things.

- *establish an evidence procedure*

Decide how you will both know when the agreement is effective. You may need an independent third part to help you assess fairly when the agreement is working.

- *consider the future of the agreement*

Mentally rehearse the agreement and imagine how it is going to work. Think of all the things that might go wrong and how you could deal with them under the agreement. In order to keep the discussion constructive it is helpful to agree a number of ground rules.

- Begin sentences with 'I' - talk about how events have made you feel, but don't begin blaming the other person.
- If you ask a question you need to take the time to listen to the reply.
- You may find some answers upsetting but it is still important to listen to your partner's answers without interrupting.
- Remember that your partner can control behaviour but not feelings.
- Don't launch into an attack if you don't like his or her answers.
- Answer questions as openly and honestly as possible. Don't say 'I don't know' if you really do know.
- If your discussion descends into an argument stop, as to continue will be counterproductive.

If you do not already do so, agree to spend some quality time with your partner each week. Try the following suggestions:

- Set aside three hours each week when you will spend uninterrupted time together. Use this time to relax and enjoy each others' company. Ideas include:
  - Taking a relaxed walk.
  - Making love.
  - Playing games.
  - Planning a holiday or other event that you can both look forward to.
  - Create a date night each week. This should be the same night each week for two hours minimum. Agree that you will not discuss money, work, business or your children during your date. Plan fun activities that you both enjoy.
  - If your children aren't going to sleep on time, try setting a clear bedtime rule. One idea with older children is a 'the night is over after nine o'clock rule', after which time parents close their bedroom door.

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- Initiate five loving touches of your partner each day, perhaps a hug or a kiss.

As we saw earlier, understanding more about each other can also be important in developing your relationship. In this section we are going to explore some further exercises and ideas to help you learn more about yourself and your partner.

## Your Belief System

Your belief system has a huge impact on your everyday life - from the way you react to people and situations to the way you make the smallest decision. If your behaviour is controlled by a fundamental belief you have about yourself, you will find it almost impossible to change the behaviour without first changing the belief. For example, Sara believed that she was destined to be a 'big girl'. Her mother had often said during Sara's childhood and adolescence 'Sara will always be a big girl', and Sara had incorporated this into the belief system she had about herself.

Many of Sara's behaviours were unconsciously designed to help her prove that this belief was true. For instance, she found it almost impossible to stick to a diet or exercise plan for longer than a few weeks. Things seemed to go all right until Sara began losing weight, and then, quite quickly, she would slip back into her old eating habits.

This section uses some of the ideas developed by Eric Berne, the originator of Transactional Analysis (usually known as TA), to help you trace the origins of your current belief system and that of your partner. TA is a theory for understanding human relationships and offers a practical approach to changing the way we think, feel and behave.

Although this book concentrates mainly on the present and the future, in this section we are going to spend a little bit of time thinking about your past. This is because your past experiences made you the people you are today, and may have a significant impact on the way you relate together as a couple.

There are several exercises in this section that ask you to remember your early childhood. Don't worry if you can't remember that far back. If you are interested in doing the exercises, you can use whatever knowledge you have about what things were like and make up what you think is most likely to have happened. If you are in contact with your parents, siblings or other important people who were around at that time, you can ask them for their memories.

## Defining Your Belief System

Eric Berne believed that we begin writing our own life story at birth. The main framework of the plot is established by the time we are four and most of the main

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details of the story completed by around seven. Berne was particularly concerned with the self-limiting decisions we make during childhood in the interests of our own survival. Such decisions culminate in an unconscious life plan or set of beliefs that govern the way we live our life. We call this our belief system. As adults we operate within the limits of our belief system. It provides a comfort zone in which we feel safe and secure, but it can also become a prison, limiting our options and the possibilities we think are open to us.

The degree to which our early history shapes our personality is open to question. It seems that our personality is the result of the combined effect of inherited traits and the environment in which we grow up. However, it is clear that much of the way we behave is the result of messages we took on board as children, and that often it is the way we behave that creates our problems. These may range from relationship difficulties to poor health or a lack of direction. Berne's ideas about how these problems originate give us a workable way of identifying likely motives for the way we behave. This can be a crucial first step towards making important changes.

Like all stories, the formation of your belief system has a beginning, middle and end; heroes, heroines, villains and bit-part players; a main theme and subplots. You may not be able to remember the beginnings of your story, but here are a few ways to trace some of the early decisions that became part of it.

*Imagine that you have written the story that is your life. Write down the answers to the following questions, working quickly and accepting the first answers that come into your mind.*

*□ What is the title of your story?*

*□ What kind of story is it? Tragedy or comedy? Heroic or banal?*

*□ Adventurous or boring?*

*□ Who are the main characters? Is there a hero/heroine? A villain?*

*□ How is the story likely to end?*

*If you are completing these exercises with your partner, compare your stories now. Are there similarities? What are the main differences?*

To understand how your belief system was formed you need to think back for a moment to the tiny child you once were. If that seems too long ago, think back to a time when your children or grandchildren were babies.

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The world is a very confusing place for young babies. Think what it must be like, surrounded by giants who speak a language you can hardly understand. You are unable to make sense of what is happening because you cannot ask the right questions and have no experience to draw on. An unexpected noise, for instance, could signal danger. If you feel cold, you don't know how to warm up. If you are hungry, you have no idea where your next meal is coming from - or whether it is coming at all.

*Lie down on the floor. Imagine what it would be like if you were dependent on another person in order to move around (just as a small baby is). How do you feel? What kind of control do you have over where you are and what you can see? Now stand up and walk around the room. Have your feelings changed? Is there a difference in the kind of control you have over what you can see and where you are?*

As babies and young children, we cannot think in adult ways. We sense the world through our emotions - feelings of rage, helplessness, happiness, fear. You have only to watch a baby to realise how intensely these feelings are experienced. As we struggle to create predictability by making sense of what is happening, we make early decisions about the nature of the world. The way to make a hostile environment feel safer is to make it predictable - that way we can prepare for and protect ourselves from danger.

This extract from *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee gives us some sense of just how confusing an everyday event can be to a small child:

*I was set down from the carrier's cart at the age of three; and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.*

*The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all around me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys.*

*I was lost and didn't know where to move. A tropic heat oozed up from the ground, rank with sharp odours of roots and nettles. Snow-clouds of elder-blossom banked in the sky, showering upon me the fumes and flakes of their sweet and giddy suffocation. High overhead ran frenzied larks, screaming, as though the sky were tearing apart.*

*For the first time in my life I was out of sight of humans. For the first time in my life I was alone in a world whose behaviour I could neither predict nor fathom... I put back my head and howled, and the sun hit me smartly on the face like a bully.*

The young Laurie feels utterly abandoned - he speaks of 'terror'. As far as he is concerned, his world is coming to an end. Fortunately for Laurie he is quickly rescued by his sisters. However, the ending might have been quite different if Laurie's plight had not been noticed, perhaps because everyone was so busy settling into the new house. Laurie might then have responded in one of a variety of ways. He might feel sad that the predictable, comfortable life experienced up to now has gone and wonder, 'Has it gone forever? Can I rely on anything lasting?' Alternatively he may feel fear and worry, 'What is going to happen? Will I ever survive?' Another response could be rage that his parents have let this happen: 'Aren't they supposed to keep life safe?' Laurie might even have experienced guilt: 'Has this happened to me because I am bad?'

As children, we try to create some predictability, and draw general conclusions from particular events. Decisions resulting from getting lost in the grass might therefore run along the lines of 'You can't depend on people'; 'There's something wrong with me'; 'I'm not worth looking for.'

Other, more positive experiences might cause the child to revise these decisions and adopt new ones, but if her experience generally confirms these decisions they will become part of the child's belief system.

The next exercise will help you identify some of the early decisions you made about yourself and your life.

*You can use a tape recorder for this exercise, or record your answers in your journal. Give your responses to the questions fairly quickly. Trust your first response even if you are not sure what it may mean.*

- What is your earliest memory?*
- Is there a family story about your birth?*
- What is the story about how you were named?*
- Describe your mother.*
- Describe your father.*
- Describe yourself.*
- What is the story about how you were named?*
- Describe your mother.*
- Describe your father.*
- Describe yourself.*
- What did your mother want you to be?*
- What did your father want you to be?*
- What do you like most about yourself?*
- Describe the good feeling that you most often have in your life.*
- What could you do to make your mother angry?*
- How did she express her anger? How did you respond?*
- What could you do to make your father angry?*
- How did he express his anger? How did you respond?*
- What do you like least about yourself?*
- Describe the negative feeling that you most often have in your life.*
- What do you wish your mother had done differently?*
- What do you wish your father had done differently?*
- If by magic you could change anything about yourself by just wishing, what would you wish for?*
- What do you want most out of life?*
- Do you think of yourself as a winner or a loser?*

This questionnaire will give you some important clues as to the nature of your belief system. You may be able to see clear connections between your present ways of thinking, feeling and behaving and the early decisions you made.

## **Strokes and Scripts**

Eric Berne developed his theories about childhood experiences further after he came across an investigation undertaken in 1945 by a researcher called Rene Spitz. The investigation involved observing babies brought up in a children's home. Although the children were looked after very well, they tended to experience more physical and emotional difficulties than children raised by their mothers or other direct carers. Spitz concluded that this was due to a lack of stimulation and contact. From this idea Berne developed the concept of 'strokes'.

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Berne decided on the word 'stroke' to describe what happens when one person recognises the existence of another. Many people believe that recognition is a basic human need, which we first see in babies with their need for touch and human contact.

Strokes are experienced on a scale from very pleasurable to very painful, and can be verbal or non-verbal. For example receiving sexual pleasure from your partner is a stroke at one end of the spectrum while receiving a beating from a bully is at the other end. However, both are strokes and what we know is that people will choose any form of stroke even if painful rather than go without. From our earliest moments, we test out all sorts of behaviours in order to find out how to get the strokes we need. When a particular form of behaviour succeeds, we are likely to repeat it and make a decision about it. In this way, strokes form and reinforce our belief system.

Any contact we have with other people can be analysed in terms of strokes. You may see someone you know, smile and say, 'Hello'; they recognise you, smile back and reply, 'Hello, nice to see you.' This is a very simple stroke exchange; you have given each other positive recognition. On another occasion on meeting, you might smile and greet the person and be answered with a frown or an angry outburst. You might not feel very good, but at least you have been recognised. This is a negative stroke.

*Here is a list of things for which you might have got strokes when you were growing up. Mark each statement with a tick or a cross depending on whether the stroke was positive praise, smiles, etc.) or negative (frowns, rebukes, etc.).*

- *For just being you - doing nothing in particular.*
- *For being persistent.*
- *For succeeding, being top, being first.*
- *For being strong and independent; not relying on others.*
- *For being funny and making people laugh.*
- *For being caring and considerate of others.*
- *For trying difficult tasks.*
- *For being clumsy or making a mess.*
- *For crying when you were frightened or sad.*
- *For showing your anger.*
- *For being quiet.*
- *For making a mistake.*
- *For taking risks.*
- *For being a leader.*
- *For asking questions.*
- *For doing things without being asked.*
- *For hugging or kissing someone to show your affection.*
- *For ???*

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The value of this exercise is in any patterns that you can identify. What is the balance between negative and positive strokes?

Berne identified four types of stroke.

**Positive conditional:** 'That was a wonderful meal you cooked.'

**Positive unconditional:** 'I love being with you.'

**Negative conditional:** 'I don't like the way you've written this.'

**Negative unconditional:** 'I dislike you.'

Notice that *unconditional* strokes are about who you are; *conditional* strokes are about what you do.

*Taking a recent ordinary day in your relationship. Write the four headings below on a piece of paper and under each one note any strokes you remember receiving; then note down the strokes you gave.*

*positive conditional;  
positive unconditional;  
negative conditional;  
negative unconditional.*

*Now complete the exercise again, thinking about the strokes you gave and received with other people too. This might be friends, relatives, children, neighbours or strangers.*

*Identify forms of behaviour that would increase your positive stroke balance. For instance, if you want to give more positive strokes to others, note down compliments you would like to give to your friends or members of your family. If you want to receive more strokes, think of at least one thing you could ask for from a friend or family member. Go ahead and give the compliments or ask for what you want.*

*List positive strokes I could give to others.*

*List positive strokes I would like to receive from others.*

Once again, the importance is in any pattern you can detect. Do you, for instance, give more than you receive? Do you tend to receive (or give) only negative or conditional strokes? In building up a picture of your own stroke balance, you may see whether you need to make changes. If as a general rule you don't receive many positive strokes think about how you can improve the situation.

Similarly, if you've noticed that you tend not to give out positive strokes to others, you can increase your output. There are several points to bear in mind here: positive attention makes us feel better; when we feel good about ourselves we tend to be more effective in whatever we are doing; giving genuine positive strokes to others will make them feel valuable; when people feel valued they tend to be co-operative and accepting towards others.

As we grow up, our parents prefer to give us certain kinds of strokes and in specific quantities. In a stable supply, these strokes are useful and we become comfortable and accustomed to receiving them. As adults we continue to prefer these forms and quantities, even if they are conditional and detrimental to us, simply because we are used to them.

Most people will choose a comfy old pair of shoes over stiff new ones even if the old ones provide no support or protection. For better or worse we tend to marry someone who delivers a stroke profile similar to the one we received from our parents. This can lead us to some baffling life choices, like staying in an abusive relationship. Which brings us back to the fact that negative strokes are better than no strokes. A child knows that they matter to their parents when receiving negative strokes, whereas a child receiving no recognition at all feels abandoned, and begins to question his whole existence.

For optimum health each of us need both positive and negative conditional strokes. If I only experience positive strokes I will not have a realistic picture of myself as others see me. Since I know at some level that I am not totally acceptable to all people or myself, I must hear some negative strokes to validate my reality and thus give meaning and value to the positive strokes I receive. Furthermore, I should receive negative strokes to gain an appreciation of which behaviours are counter productive for me.

### *Message Received*

It is important to remember that your early beliefs were formed as a result of *your perception* of what was going on around you as a young child. This perception was based on your underdeveloped ability to understand things, so it is possible that what you perceived was different from what was actually intended. Even before you were able to speak you were interpreting messages through your experience of physical contact. If Mother held you close and warmly you are likely to have received the message, 'I'm loved and wanted.' If she was tense and worried - perhaps because she had never held a baby before - you might have decided, 'I'm unlovable and rejected.' The TA view is that these very early perceptions are extremely influential because they create the foundation from which other decisions are made.

TA is just one way of looking at our belief system - but what we are talking about here, whatever name we give them, is the fundamental beliefs we each have about ourselves and the way we relate to other people.

### *Changing Your Belief System*

Changing our belief system seems deceptively simple - we just start to believe something different. However, beliefs that have apparently (to our subconscious) kept us alive for most of our lives are not so easily changed. It takes work and patience.

Our belief system provides a 'comfort zone' in which we are comfortable to live. In reality, it might not be comfortable at all - it might be a frustrating, dissatisfying place, it might even be painful, abusive or violent. But for us it is a secure place - it is where our self-image and belief system say we should be.

*Tony tolerated an abusive marriage for many years. The fact that his wife's critical, often cruel attitude was very much like his mother's was not lost on him, but somehow he could not seem to change. On one level Tony was desperate to leave his wife, but on another his belief system told him that this relationship was all he was worth. He was in a place where we felt secure - where he knew how to be.*

The system of belief, self-talk and self-image that keeps people like Tony stuck in very unhappy places is sometimes described as a loop: our self-image is created by our belief system; which in turn is created and reinforced by our self-talk. The loop has three main components: our self-image, our self-talk, and our behaviour. Each component reinforces the other, so, for instance, we behave in ways that act to confirm our self-image and then take that as proof that what we believed about ourselves was true all along.

Breaking out of this loop may seem almost impossibly difficult, but the key is to interrupt it. You can use the following exercise to get you started. It shows that with the right approach you can begin to change your beliefs about yourself.

**Step 1.** Write down a list of all the things you criticise yourself for. Include small things as well as the more important matters; don't be put off by the idea that some things are too trivial to count. Often we criticise ourselves without even being aware that we are doing it, so you might find it useful to carry a notepad around with you for a couple of days. When you catch yourself in a criticism write it down.

**Step 2.** Go through the list and think about where these criticisms have come

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from. If you find yourself thinking ‘That’s just how I am’; ‘I’ve always been like that’; ‘I can’t help it’ it is a sign that you are holding on to labels as an obstacle to changing and developing to your full potential. As we saw earlier, many of these labels can be traced to messages you picked up as a child. Each time you use one of these labels it is as if you are also saying ‘... and I intend to stay the same.’ Here are some of the labels people often put on their list: I’m shy; I’m too short-tempered; I’m too fat; I’m too serious; I’m no good at sport; I’m unkind; I’m irresponsible; I’m a terrible cook; I’m tactless; I’m lazy; I’m antisocial; I’m reckless.

Think about how you first got these labels. There are two possibilities. The first is that someone else gave you the label, probably when you were a child and had no way of assessing how accurate it was. Take Clive for example. He is eight and loves charging about the park with a ball. His co-ordination is poor (and later it transpires that he has poor eyesight), but he has a lot of fun with the ball. His father despairs at his lack of co-ordination and tells him he will never be any good at sport. The story of Clive and the football become a family joke. Clive believes his father and from then on tries to avoid sport at school. The enjoyment and freedom of an afternoon on the park with a football are forgotten. He tells himself ‘I’m no good at sport’, and will probably carry around this label for the rest of his life.

Another reason why we sometimes hold on to labels is that they help us to avoid risky, unpleasant or tedious activities. One of Susan’s labels is ‘I’m useless with money’. Her husband deals with all of the family finances, sorts out the bills and then tells Susan how much they have available to spend on food, clothes and luxuries each month. Susan’s label gives her an excuse to avoid this tiresome and often worrying task.

**Step 3.** Now challenge yourself to believe something different - the opposite view. Create a sentence incorporating your new, positive belief. So, for instance, if your old belief was ‘I am a terrible cook’, your new belief will be ‘I am a good cook’. The sentence should be in the present tense (‘am’) as if this is already true for you; it should also contain a positive description (such as ‘a great runner’) and it should begin with ‘I...’.

**Step 4.** Repeat this sentence to yourself over and over again. This step requires constant repetition to break into the closed loop of your old belief system. You have had a lifetime to acquire and reinforce your old, limiting beliefs, so it may take some time for the new ones to cut in. It is a good idea to begin with something fairly simple, to prove to yourself that this technique actually works, but it can also be used with much more fundamental beliefs, such as ‘I am unsuccessful’, or ‘I am stupid’.

**Step 5.** Visualise yourself when your new positive belief is true, and think about this image often. For instance, if your new belief is ‘I am confident in my relationship’ you can begin to visualise yourself as your new, confident self. This will become your new self-image, and your new truth.

**Step 6.** Also begin using the ‘self-talk interrupt’ process. Whenever you catch yourself thinking the old, limiting belief stop that voice and replace it immediately with your new sentence (e.g. ‘I am confident in my relationship’) even if it is not yet true.

## Working with an Online Counsellor or Sex Therapist

Sometimes we encounter challenges that are difficult to deal with alone. Working with a counsellor or sex therapist can provide the support you need to overcome difficulties

You can arrange online sessions with one of our relationship counsellors or sex therapists through our website at:

[www.sextherapyonline.org](http://www.sextherapyonline.org)