

How to Communicate With Love (Even When You're Mad)



A marriage therapist offers a step-by-step guide for a conversation with your partner when emotions are running high.

BY MICHELLE BECKER | FEBRUARY 14, 2023

Our romantic relationships can be a great source of joy and fulfillment in our lives. Yet they can also be the place we most struggle with communicating in a healthy and effective way. It seems the more important the relationship, the greater our potential to fall into reactivity when things seem to be going awry. As a seasoned marriage and family therapist, international compassion teacher, and the developer of the Compassion for Couples program, I've had a front row seat to this.



There are a lot of formulas out there for how to communicate well. One I like is from Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication: "I feel _____ when you _____ and I need _____f." It's a really great formula, especially because it helps people to speak from a place of vulnerability.

Here's the thing, though: *Formulas don't always work.* That's because the words we use are just a small part of what we communicate. Our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice together communicate much more about how we feel than the words we are using—which means that a healthy approach to communication requires that we come from a grounded and open-hearted place. This often means soothing ourselves before we turn toward another person.

More than just words

When there is dissonance between our words and our emotional state, it's the emotional state that gets communicated. Consider these three scenarios:

- Scenario one: You wake up happy after a great night's sleep. You look over and are happy to see your partner. You're feeling really good about yourself, your partner, and your relationship, and you're looking forward to the day ahead. You greet your partner with the words, "Good morning."
- Scenario two: You wake up to the alarm. You feel terrible. You've hardly gotten any sleep, and you have a day ahead of you that you are dreading. To make matters worse, you look over and remember how irritated you are with your partner. You greet your partner with the words, "Good morning."
- Scenario three: You wake up feeling good. You look over and see your partner, and you feel really good about them and your relationship. You notice how attracted you are to your partner and you feel like flirting in hopes the morning will get even better. You greet your partner with the words, "Good morning."

In each scenario, you greeted your partner with the same words. However, what you communicated was very different because of the differing states you were in. In the first scenario, what you communicated was that you were happy to see your partner. In the second scenario, your partner could surely tell you weren't happy to see them, and in the third you signaled that you were interested in being intimate. All with those simple two words, "Good morning."

Would you trust an apology from your partner if they angrily shouted, "I'm sorry!" at you? Probably not. We can't really fake how we feel. And we don't have to fake anything, actually. What works better is to tend to ourselves and our partners. We need to move out of the state where reactivity runs the show (your body's threat/defense system with its fight/flight/freeze modes) and into a place where we are able to be responsive (activating the care system with its loving, connected presence).

When we are calmer, we can choose a response that is more likely to have the desired effect. But how do we move from an instinctive, reactive state to one characterized by wisdom and compassion?

Four steps of compassionate communication

In my experience working with couples, the most skillful path to communication actually involves taking in how we and our partner feel and tending to what we need. There are four basic steps to compassionate communication:

1. Mindfulness: We need to disengage from reactivity. We begin by giving ourselves space after noticing we are caught in reactivity. When we notice this, we're already on the path to better communication. [L] [SEP]

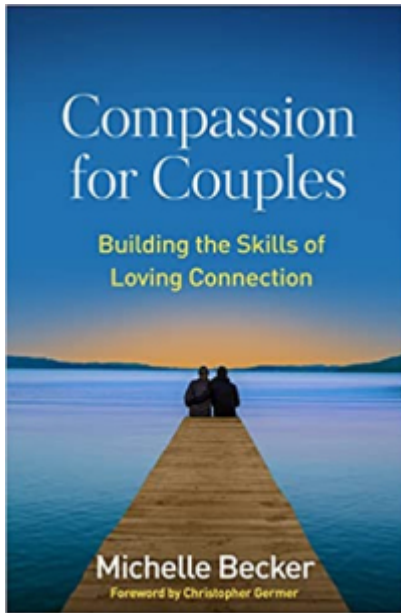
Choose your favorite mindfulness practice to come into the moment in a way that feels safe. For many, tuning in to the sensation of breathing—especially allowing ourselves to be soothed by the rhythm of the breath—can be helpful. Others find it helpful to turn the attention to where the body is making contact with the floor or chair, or focus our attention on sights or sounds in the environment as a way of coming safely into the moment.

Generally, pausing our thoughts and emotions and coming into the body (or the senses) can help us ground in the present moment and allow our physiology to settle, whereas replaying thoughts and emotions in our head keeps us activated and in a state of reactivity.

For example, say that Joe was 45 minutes late getting home from work and his partner, Kira, was steaming mad. But rather than blast him the second he walks in the door, she can excuse herself for a moment. Alone, she might say to herself, “I know you're upset and you have every right to be upset. Let's take care of you now,” then focus on the sensation of breathing for a minute.

2. Self-compassion: We turn our attention to our own state of being. Once we've found safety in the moment, we can tend to our emotional needs. What is it that was triggered in us, and what is it that we need? Can we choose to respond to ourselves with

wisdom and compassion?



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Generally, people do know how to be compassionate; we just may not be so good at offering compassion to ourselves. It can help to think about what you would do for a friend who was struggling with the same situation. What would you say to them? You might try saying those things to yourself. Maybe it's something like, "I hear you. I'll stay with you. We'll get through this." Or maybe it is something else.

You can also explore what you wish someone else would say to you, then try saying these same words to yourself. Taking the time to tend to our own needs helps us feel safe in being open to someone else.

For Kira, she might she ask herself what was underneath her anger. Perhaps she felt unimportant, unloved, and overwhelmed by the demands of being at home with their kids. Pausing for a moment and putting her hand on her heart, she might said to herself, "That is really hard. And I know you're not alone in feeling this way. All parents feel this way at times. I see you and care about you and I'll help you find a way to get a break."

3. Compassion: We turn our attention to the vulnerability of the other person.

Once we've tended to ourselves, we can open to the vulnerability of the other person with curiosity. We don't want to lose ourselves, and we also don't want to lose the experience of the other person. This is our chance to connect with and understand them, or to be understood.

Is it possible that we don't know the other's full story or experience? We begin to tend to another by skillfully listening to what they are saying. Then we broaden our observations to take in the person as a whole. When we open to the experience and vulnerability of the other person, we allow our hearts to soften in response to them.

For Kira, if she lets go of the judgment of Joe as uncaring, she might remember the pressure that he's been under at work, how overwhelmed he has seemed lately, and how much she cares about his well-being.

4. Values: We turn our attention toward choosing our response. Remembering our values, how we want to be in relationships, or our vows to be loving, compassionate, understanding, etc., can help us know how we want to proceed. What would actually be in line with our values?

We choose to respond in a way that has integrity for us. We consider what is truly kind here. (This does not mean becoming a doormat!) When we have a sense of what is wise and compassionate in this situation, we are ready to communicate skillfully.

At this point, Kira might decide to give Joe some space to relax after work, asking that they have a conversation when the kids go to bed and he is more likely to be able to hear what she has to say.

The four C's of compassionate communication^[SEP]

The above steps to compassionate communication help prepare us to have a conversation, as they did for Kira. However, when we are actually in the conversation, we can often find reactivity arising again. One thing I have found helpful for the couples

I work with are the *four C's of compassionate communication*. They can help guide us back into a state that is kind, caring, and more likely to feel safe to our partner and enable them to stay with us, listen, and understand.

As you think about speaking with your partner about something that may be challenging, try following the four C's of compassionate speaking:

- **Centering: awake body:** It is helpful to pause here. Take a moment to focus your attention on your breathing (or another safe anchor) and come into the body. Release any unnecessary tension.
- **Curiosity: open mind:** Notice what might be under your anger or frustration. Are there vulnerable feelings that need attention? Those may be easier for your partner to hear. Keep the focus on yourself and speak from vulnerability. For example, Kira might speak to Joe about how overwhelmed she felt with the kids and how she feels unloved and unimportant when he is late without calling.
- **Connection: warm heart:** Remember the listener is someone you love and are loved by, even when distress arises. It is human to make mistakes. As best you can, speak with an attitude of gentleness. Avoid blame, accusations, and name calling.
- **Compassion: kind action:** Is there something you need from the listener? How might you feel calmed, comforted, and reassured? Ask for what you need. For example, Kira could tell Joe that it would help if he called to say he would be late and acknowledged that this would make things harder for her.

While it can be challenging moving from a state of reactivity into a state of responsiveness as a speaker, when you do, you have the best chance of your partner being able to hear and understand you.

Even more challenging than speaking from a state of compassion can be listening from a state of compassion, especially if the speaker is upset about something we've done. Here, the four C's can also be helpful:

- **Centering: awake body:** Again, it is helpful to pause when you begin and take a moment to focus your attention on your breathing (or other safe anchor).

- **Curious: open mind:** Become a detective, trying to understand what the speaker is communicating. Let go of toxic certainty. Remember it is about them, not you. Listen with an attitude of encouragement. They are letting you come closer and understand them, which is a gift. For example, if Kira is open enough to ask Joe about his experience at work, she might learn that the reason he was late is because supporting the family is important to him. He knew she'd be upset, but he didn't know what he could say or do to make it better. He does care about her, and he is relieved to know what she needs in these situations.
- **Connected: warm heart:** Again, remember the speaker is someone you love and are loved by. Remember it is human to struggle. Perhaps you can remember a time you felt the way they are feeling, too.
- **Compassionate: kind action:** Is there anything you can say or do to help calm, comfort, or reassure your partner? For example, "What do you need? How can I help?" Be sure to wait until your partner feels fully heard before you take any action. Often just your loving, connected presence is what's needed.

Compassionate listening is a skill that can be developed, even if it feels awkward at first. One thing that helps is to approach your conversations with the intention of listening to understand rather than listening to solve the problem. When you listen to understand, your partner is likely to feel important and cared about and in the end may feel understood.

There is so much to explore when it comes to compassionate communication, but at the heart of it is how you show up. I've seen really skillful wording fail spectacularly when said from a place of reactivity. I've also seen really poor wording beautifully received when said from a place of care and compassion. Taking the time to practice the four C's can make all the difference when communicating with our partner. Even when we don't agree, we can come away feeling loved and connected.

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