

# FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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## PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

### Relationship Workshop: Lets Talk About It

Hello Everyone,

I hope you are all doing well and not melting in what appears to be Michigan's cruel attempt to over correct. Remember when it snowed not too long ago? Now its about a thousand degrees outside. Hope you are drinking water. I felt the need to humble brag, this is newsletter number 10! I certainly hope these have been helpful and a way for us to connect.

I liked how the last two Newsletters built off of each other and were also in response to student issues directly. For the next couple of weeks I plan on continuing multi-part newsletters by doing a series on relationships. I plan on keeping it broad and talking about concepts and ideas that apply to ALL relationships, not just intimate partner. I hope you can take some of this information and apply it to your own relationships be it friendships, significant others, or professional relationships. Part One: *Communication*.

In general, I would argue that we as humans are getting worse at communicating. I think there are a couple of major factors that play into this. One is the clinical perspective, social anxiety. There is an increase of diagnosed social anxiety in our population and I would say it is the number one or two most common reason my clients seek therapy. Talking with others makes us feel anxious and therefore we avoid it. Another major factor is likely our smart phones. I don't mean to demonize the amazing piece of technology we carry, but it enables poor communication skills. Think to yourself right now, would you rather talk on the phone or just text? Texting is efficient and obviously easy, but it takes away our ability to practice speaking with one another. If you don't use it, you can lose it. I would say the final major piece to poor communication (in my opinion) is social media. I am sure you have heard the saying "We are more connected then ever, but feeling more alone". Social media allows us to quickly catch up on our friend's lives without ever having to talk with them. We like their photos and give them a retweet (is twitter still cool?....asking for a friend) without ever saying two words to them. Do you agree we are getting worse at communicating? What do you think causes it? I wanted to spend part one of this series talking about communication and how it impacts our relationships.

John Gottman is an expert in communication. When I was in school my professor told me that Gottman was famous for having a 10-minute conversation with couples and he could tell almost 100% of the time whether or not a relationship would work. The guy knows his stuff. I will be referencing him throughout this newsletter.

Gottman poses that there are "Four Horsemen" of the communication apocalypse. Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling. **Criticism** is different than talking about an issue or complainant.

Within relationships there will, from time to time, be issues that come up and need to be addressed. Criticism is different because it is an attack on a person's character. Telling a friend you are upset because they didn't invite you to a party is different than calling them thoughtless and self centered never once thinking about anyone but themselves.

You can think of **Contempt** like you would disrespect or being mean to another person. This could be in words like insults or ridicule but could be in non-verbals as well. Gottman talks about how the goal with contempt is to make the other person feel as if they have no value. He makes the distinction that contempt goes further than criticism as contempt creates a power hierarchy where one party is superior to the other.

**Defensiveness** is different in that it is more of a response to communication. Defensiveness indicates a lack of openness to how our behaviors may have impacted others. A good example of defensiveness could be your intimate partner telling you their feelings were hurt when you didn't take the trash out and you respond with "I have been busy all damn day and if you want it taken out so badly why don't you just do it?!" I want to make the distinction between an explanation and defensiveness. An explanation to the above example could be "I am sorry, I have been busy all day and I just forgot". Defensiveness is an exaggerated response where one is closed off and unwilling to hear the other person.

**Stonewalling** is when a person shuts down and stops communicating. Like defensiveness, this is typically in response to contempt or criticism. If not identified this can become a habit and an automatic response to conflict. Withdrawing from conflict within a relationship can be understandable depending on context and circumstance, but it will also keep the relationship stuck without solutions to the problem.

[Here](#) is a link to a longer article about the Four Horsemen from the Gottman Institute. Increasing your awareness of these communication styles is key to improving communication in a relationship. If it is something that happens regularly and persists after trying to talk about it, seeking therapy can be helpful to better understand the origins of the behavior and more strategies to help change them.

I wanted to touch on some other communication do's and don'ts. Again, these concepts can be applied to any kind of relationship. The biggest mistake I see people make in terms of communication is not one of the Four Horsemen. The biggest issue I see is that people have serious conversations electronically. Having conversations over text/messenger can be dangerous and I would pose that you have either personal or second hand experience where a conversation was totally misinterpreted because it was held electronically. Our brains have the amazing capacity to interpret not just words, but tone, volume, body language, and facial expression. Fun fact: the posterior superior temporal sulcus is the dedicated part of our brain that just recognizes facial expressions ([Source](#)). Having serious/important conversations over text may be easier in the moment, but it is a significant gamble that could make things worse. When in doubt, talk about the heavy important stuff in person and if you can't in person, at least on the phone.

I think a lot of people downplay the effectiveness of "I statements" because they may not fully understand the method behind the madness. I statements are important because they communicate how YOU are feeling in response to what someone else did. It allows you to communicate your feelings and thoughts in an open and non-threatening way so a solution can be found. If you have never used an "I statement" before

here is the script: “I feel XXXXXXX (emotion) when you XXXXX (behavior) because XXXXXX (explanation). What I need(s) is..... Try using this script in all of your relationships when there is conflict or issues to address.

Speaking of conflict, stop avoiding them. Arguments and disagreements are normal and often signs of a healthy relationship as long as you address them. Many people in friendships and relationships don’t talk about their issues for a very understandable reason, they don’t want to hurt the other person’s feelings. They are upset at what their partner did, but they know that bringing it up will start a fight and will make the other person feel bad. That’s ok. Relationships are not supposed to be all unicorns and rainbows and your partner is allowed to feel bad if they made a mistake. If you avoid having tough conversations the problems are not going to go away. People can’t improve unless they know they are making a mistake. A good strategy to use is to come up with a safe-word or phrase. When this is used, both parties know that a serious conversation has to happen and both parties AGREE to be open and listen to the other. If a safe-word feels awkward you can also consider an object. A client of mine agreed with her partner to use a stuffed fish if they needed to have a conversation. When the fish gets brought out, they both know they need to address issues effecting their relationship. Writing a letter to start a conversation is another great way to organize thoughts and feelings.

Give people time to process. Especially in emotional situations involving close friendships or intimate partnerships. Some people need time to think and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings. This is normal and healthy. People process information and emotions at different speeds and both parties need to respect this reality. If you are going to have a serious conversation give yourself plenty of time. When emotions are high, we don’t think logically. We can say things we tend to regret. Giving time to process and think without pressure helps people feel safe in conflict. Taking “time outs” is also totally acceptable, just make sure you don’t use a time out to avoid finding resolution.

The Gottman Institute ([Here](#)) is an amazing online resource I want to direct all of you to check out. It is all science based and has great info about parenting, and relationships. [Verywellmind](#) has a good article with more skills and tools to improve communication. This is a TedTalk about building your relationships through communication by “[connecting the dots](#)”. If you are the kind of person who follows up on these additional resources, I encourage you to check out all of John Gottman’s work. He is considered the expert in the field and has published multiple books.

Your homework this week is to pick a relationship, intimate or friendship, and do a quick temperature check. Is there an issue that needs to be addressed that you have been avoiding? Do you notice any of the four horsemen in your communication style? I want you to practice having healthy effective conversations. The more you do it, the easier it will become. Save the electronic communications for that strong meme game.

Take Care of Yourselves and Wash Your Hands,

Andy