

25 Communication Breakers & How To Repair

1. NEGATIVE PROBLEM DESCRIPTION: A Statement of the problem that is *too long, too vague, and/or too emotional* (i.e., harsh, abrasive, hostile tone).

POSITIVE PROBLEM DESCRIPTION: *Short sentences* defining a relationship problem. These sentences combine the X-Y-Z. Annoyance Rule with the Positive Specific Request Rule: "I feel angry (X) when you don't pay the bills (Y) at the end of the month (Z). I would like you to pay them on a regular basis." Together, these two rules define the problem and seek change.

KEYS: be brief, ask for an increase in behavior, be specific, and ask in a friendly, non-demanding tone of voice.

2. CROSS-COMPLAINING: Instead of *validating* or *listening* to partner's complaint, you immediately jump in with your own problem (self-referencing).

VALIDATION: Sentences which communicate, "I value you, that makes sense."

Examples of validation: listening, accepting responsibility, compliance, approval, and agreement.

3. INTERRUPTING: When listener breaks in and disrupts the flow of partner's speech.

ACTIVE LISTENING & SUMMARIZING: A sentence which rephrases or summarizes your partner's statement.

4. DENYING RESPONSIBILITY; EXCUSES: Statement which says, "I am (or we are) not responsible for this problem; it's not my problem!" Excuse is a personal denial of responsibility based on a weak rationale. Nothing gets resolved or understood.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY: A sentence which says, "I am (or we are) responsible for this problem." These sentences *avoid* making excuses. This attitude leads to resolve, understanding, and intimacy.

5. NONCOMPLIANCE: Refusal to consider partner's request, thoughts, and feelings. A general attitude of *unwillingness* to be reasonable, to understand, and to try.

COMPLIANCE: Sentence or action that acknowledges and contributes to partner's request.

6. CRITICISM: Statement of dislike, disapproval, or negative evaluation of a specific behavior or attitude in partner and said with a hostile tone of voice.

APPROVAL: Sentences that favor partner's attributes, actions, or statements. Includes compliments or praise ("I like the way you...").

7. DISAGREEMENT: When the usual reaction is a quick disagreement with just about anything your partner says.

AGREEMENT: Sentence showing you understand a statement of fact, opinion, or suggestion made by partner.

8. HIGH DISAGREEMENT-TO-AGREEMENT RATIO: Disagreement sentences occur more frequently than do agreement sentences when you are problem-solving.

HIGH AGREEMENT-TO-DISAGREEMENT RATIO: Using a high number of agreement and a low number of disagreement sentences when problem-solving. This does not mean that partners are in constant agreement. It means that agreement sentences occur more frequently than do disagreements.

9. COMPLAINING: Whining or bitter expressions of one's own suffering without explicitly blaming the partner ("I'm *always* the one who has to stay home with the kids" - said in a whining voice).

COMPOSED: Expressing one's own frustration, suffering in a calm way.

10. ASSUMPTIONS: Premature conclusion made without first checking out information with one's partner.

SEEKING INFORMATION: Using questions to get correct information before making a judgment; having a curious attitude.

11. EXAGGERATION: Sentences which use words like *always* and *never*. Or a sentence which *overstates* the situation. An *over-generalization*.

ACCURATENESS: Sentences that are factual, true, or accurate.

12. NEGATIVE MIND-READING: Statement attributing negative thoughts, feelings, motives, attitudes, or actions to partner. To assume you know what's going on in your partner's head is unproductive and leads to defensiveness.

POSITIVE MIND-READING: A sentence which infers or assumes a positive attitude on the part of the other partner ("It appears you did my chores so I could relax! Thank you!").

13. OVERTALK: Behavior of not sharing the air-time equally; monopolizing.

TAKING TURNS: Being sensitive to share the talk time equally with partner.

14. BLAMING: Statement which accuses the other partner of causing the problem.

COOPERATION; COLLABORATION: Sentences which convey the following: "We need to team up and work together," "This is *our* problem," "We both need to learn some new behaviors," or "We both have to change."

15. EXCESSIVE COUNTERPROPOSALS: Sentences showing a reluctance to "make a deal." Instead of using sentences aimed at negotiating a mutually satisfying social contact, these sentences convey a *contrary attitude*.

NEGOTIATIONS; CONTRACTING: Statements which attempt to find solutions that satisfy both partners or which convey an agreement-making attitude. Can include a willingness to put the solution into a written agreement.

16. POLARIZED: Sentences indicating a partner is glued into a corner resisting change. These sentences show a refusal to budge from a position and an expectation that the other partner do all the changing.

COMPROMISE: A sentence offering to mutually exchange behaviors. "I'll agree to write out the bills at the end of the month if you agree to stack the bills neatly in the top desk drawer so I won't have to hunt for them."

17. LIMITING OPTIONS: Sentences which attempt to solve the problem with one or two solutions.

BRAINSTORMING: A process in which the couple creatively lists many solutions to a problem without initially critiquing or criticizing them.

18. PROBLEM-ORIENTED: Sentences which continue to describe the problem or focus on past history. A failure to offer positive solutions, negative solutions, or compromise solutions.

PROPOSING SOLUTIONS: Constructive sentences aimed at changing the future. Solutions may be positive, in which a behavior is initiated or increased ("I suggest we play more tennis or golf together"). Solutions can also be negative, where a behavior is stopped or decreased ("I suggest we watch less TV"). Or compromise solutions can be offered.

19. DIVIDED ATTENTION: Negative nonverbal behaviors that compete with the conversation (reading newspaper, watching TV, etc.).

PAYING ATTENTION: Focusing undivided attention on our partner and the problem to be solved.

20. SIDETRACKING: Irrelevant sentences reflecting inability to stick to the point during a problem-solving discussion. Or sentences which jump from problem to problem without first getting resolution.

TRACKING: Ability to stay on one subject until it is resolved before moving to a different subject.

21. NEGATIVE VAGUE DEMANDS: Statements which (1) ask a partner to stop or decrease a behavior; (2) are unclear or confusing; and (3) are delivered in a commanding, ordering tone. Such sentences stoke up antagonism.

POSITIVE SPECIFIC REQUESTS: PSR's are needed to begin the problem-solving process, but they can also be used at other times. PSR's include three parts: (1) be positive by asking for an increase in behavior, not a decrease; (2) be specific by talking about when, where, and how much; and (3) request changes - don't demand.

22. PUT-DOWNS; REJECTION: A comment intended to belittle or embarrass the partner. Or a sentence refusing to give help when requested.

SOCIAL SUPPORT: Sentences or behaviors that express unconditional love, care, empathy, acceptance, approval, appreciation, affection, value and worth of another person irrespective of accomplishment.

23. ALOOFNESS: Body posture reflecting negative attitude. Distance. Underdeveloped ability to identify or articulate feelings. Not connecting the event or situation at hand with a deeper understanding.

POSITIVE PHYSICAL TOUCH: Affectionate touch, hug, kiss, pat, pinch, holding hands.

24. NEGATIVE NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR: Negative facial cues include frowns; sneers; expressions of fear, anger, disgust. Negative voice cues include voice tones that sound cold, tense, fearful, impatient, whining, sarcastic, blaming, angry, or mocking. Negative body cues and gestures are inattention, finger pointing, and aloofness.

POSITIVE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: Nonverbal communication is that part of a message which is not words, but which may accompany words or occur separately from words and includes facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, volume, etc. Positive non-verbals include smiles, head nods, laughter, eye contact, winks, a gentle voice, and touch. It is the skill of talking about a problem and at the same time staying in a positive emotional state.

25. NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY: The action in which a partner exchanges coercive behavior. That is, s/he retaliates - *gets revenge!* If husband's previous act is negative, wife's consequent act is likely to be negative ("An eye for an eye").

POSITIVE RECIPROCITY: The ability to respond with a positive behavior after receiving a negative behavior from your partner.