

Figure 15.1. Sample Assessment Questions for Relationship Problems

Appointment Type	Sample Assessment Question
Individual	Do you feel safe in your relationship?
	Have you been physically hurt or threatened by your partner?
	Has your partner forced you to have sex?
	Do you feel controlled or frightened by your partner?
	Has there been any infidelity in your relationship?
Joint	Describe your main concerns with the relationship.
	What affects your relationship problems the most?
	What problem occurs most frequently? How often?
	What problem has the most negative effect on your relationship?
	Describe a recent disagreement and how you resolved it.
	What seems to improve the closeness you feel?
	How often do you spend time in leisure activities together?
	What have you tried so far to improve the relationship problems?
	Have you ever participated in any couples therapy?
	Have you read any self-help relationship materials?
	What problem would you like to target first?
	What do you think would help improve the relationship?

Figure 15.2. Handout for Effective Listening

Improving Communication through Effective Listening

Good Communication = Speaking + Listening

Sometimes when people try to improve communication with their partner, they focus only on how to better express their thoughts or get their own point across. While being a good speaker is important, effective communication also requires that partners be good listeners. The following strategies can help you improve your ability to listen effectively. Practice these components of good listening, and ask for feedback on how you are doing.

Key Strategies for Effective Listening

- Non-verbal behavior. Face the speaker and maintain good eye-contact. Nodding at appropriate times can also show you continue to listen.
- Avoid interrupting. Interruptions communicate a lack of respect for the speaker. If you have trouble with this, briefly jot down your thoughts and ideas on a pad of paper while your partner is speaking. This allows your partner to express his or her thoughts uninterrupted, and allows you the opportunity to remember and discuss your ideas later.
- Summarize. When your partner has finished speaking, summarize what you heard. Ask questions if you don't understand something they said.
- Reflect. Reflect the key thoughts and emotions that you heard. This tells your partner that you accurately understood what he or she was trying to communicate (whether or not you agree with the point or perspective).

Figure 15.3. Handout for Communication Practice Plan

Home Practice Plan for Improving Communication

1. We will review the handouts on Assertive Communication and Effective Listening at least _____ time(s) in the upcoming week.
2. We will practice effective communication (good speaking and good listening skills) _____ times per week for at least _____ minutes each time.
3. Time of day that we will set aside for practice: _____.
4. We will practice communication skills using the following topics (in order from least to most difficult to discuss):
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____
 - f. _____
 - g. _____

We will remember that the goal of these communication practice times is not necessarily to solve a problem or resolve a conflict. The goal is to improve our ability to discuss difficult issues in healthier ways through effective speaking and listening.

Figure 15.4. Handout for Problem-Solving Guidelines for Couples

Couples Guidelines for Problem-Solving

Effectively solving problems or making difficult decisions as a couple can prove difficult. Many couples find that following a specific set of guidelines when resolving an important issue helps them arrive at a solution that is acceptable to both individuals, and minimizes arguing or defensiveness. The following guidelines summarize a three-step approach to solving problems together.

1. Define the Problem

- a. Agree on a time and place to discuss the problem.
- b. Partner A describes the problem in specific behavioral terms and shares the impact of the problem on him or her. Focus on one problem at a time. Avoid accusations, arguing, or proposing solutions.
- c. Partner B summarizes what was shared by Partner A, and then describes his or her own understanding of the issue. Avoid arguing, becoming defensive, or proposing solutions.
- d. Together, the couple develops a brief written statement of the problem that they both agree on and are willing to address.

2. Identify a Solution

- a. Couple brainstorms potential solutions.
- b. Couple identifies pros and cons of each possible solution, eliminating unacceptable ones, and identifying those that appear acceptable to both.
- c. If unable to find a solution that meets the needs of both, the couple develops a compromise plan.

- d. The couple writes down the final solution, including specific details on who will do what actions, when, and in what situations.

3. Evaluate the Solution

- a. Couple agrees upon a trial period to implement the solution.
- b. At the end of the trial period, the couple evaluates how well the solution worked.
- c. If needed, the couple modifies their original solution using the problem-solving steps again.

Problem-Solving Worksheet for Couples

A. Statement of the Problem (Developed jointly): _____

B. List of Possible Solutions (Brainstorming):

C. Best Options. Discuss the pros and cons of each possible solution. Considering the preferences of both individuals, place an “X” by options that are unacceptable. Of those remaining, select the best one and circle it.

D. Statement of Solution (Include who will do what, when, and in which situations):

E. Length of Trial Period: _____

F. Evaluation of Solution: Did the solution work well enough? Yes or No

If yes, continue plan developed above. If changes are needed, set aside time for joint problem solving to modify or improve the solution.

Figure 15.5. Handout for Behavior Exchange

Taking Action to Show Your Partner You Care

Often when couples are having difficulties in their relationship, they don't spend as much time in positive interactions, showing each other they care. Making a point to do something for your partner on a regular basis that shows you care for them, appreciate them, or are simply thinking of them can increase intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Step 1: Make a list of actions you could do for your partner that would show them you care for and appreciate them. These should be easy to implement and not cost much money. Examples could include making a favorite food, giving a back rub, doing a chore that normally falls to the partner, or giving a smile and a hug when returning home.

Step 2: Decide with your partner whether you will share your lists or keep them private.

Step 3: Decide with your partner how frequently you will each do an activity from your list (e.g., number of times per day or week): _____ per _____

Step 4: Plan a time with your partner when you will review progress, discuss what seemed to work well, and make changes and future plans. Date to Review: _____

Figure 15.6. Sample Intimate Partner Violence Safety Plan

My Safety Plan

☐ I will go to a safe area of the house if I am in danger. A safe area is an area of the house where there are no weapons and where there is a way to escape. My safe area is:

☐ I will have a cell phone with me at all times, if possible. Numbers to call for help include:

- ☐ 911 (call if life or safety are in danger)
- ☐ Local violence shelter: _____
- ☐ Friend/family: _____
- ☐ National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

☐ I will tell a trusted neighbor, friend, or family member of my situation. I will develop a safety plan and “signal” to use with them when I need help:

☐ I will keep weapons (like knives or guns) locked away or as difficult to access as possible. Location: _____

Other:

Figure 15.7. Resources for Couples: Websites, Mobile Applications, and Books

Type	Location	Description
Websites	National Domestic Violence Hotline Website www.thehotline.org	The website contains information on domestic violence, strategies for safety, a variety of tips on healthy relationships, additional resources for those affected by IPV, and downloadable safety plan handouts.
	The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy www.aamft.org	This website contains a locator service for marriage and family therapists, as well as information about a variety of topics related to family and relationship functioning.
	Help Guide www.helpguide.org	This non-profit website offers a section on relationships, including advice for building loving relationships, effective communication skills, and conflict resolution skills. It provides step-by-step guidance on how to rebuild a couple's connection.
	University of Minnesota--Taking Charge of Your Health and Wellbeing www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/wellbeing/relationships	This website contains information on healthy relationships and offers a variety of improvement methods for couples in distress. It describes ways to nurture relationships and improve communication. It also contains information on a number of complementary and alternative medicine approaches to health.

	The Gottman Institute www.gottman.com	The Gottman Institute website contains evidence-based information and resources for couples and professionals. It provides links to additional resources and information on workshops for couples and trainings for professionals.
Mobile Applications	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “I Feel” www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	Couples may, at times, struggle with telling their partner how they feel. This app is loaded with hundreds of emotional states that may help couples recognize how their partner is feeling if they are not able to express it in words.
	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “Love Maps” www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	This app incorporates a variety of questions that may help couples navigate through their partner’s world. The different questions allow couples to learn about each other’s past, while gaining knowledge of their current likes, dislikes, and preferences that they may not have known before.
	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “Open Ended Questions” www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	This app offers numerous questions that dig deeper into their partner’s personal life. Instead of the everyday questions that are asked between couples, this app contains 50 questions that are designed to allow couples to connect on a deeper level.
	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “Give Appreciation”	This app presents 76 different ways of showing appreciation that can be used with partners to build closeness and show gratitude toward each other.

	www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	
	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “Expressing Needs” www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	This app is designed to enable couples to better understand the needs of their partner and help them have a desire to meet those needs. It provides a way of assessing one’s own needs and then communicating them to their partner in a positive manner.
	The Gottman Institute smartphone application “Fun and Play” www.gottman.com/iphone-apps-2	This app is designed to bring fun back into the relationship. Couples can use this app to find activities that are appealing to both of them. There are 82 suggested fun activities offered through this app.
Books	Fighting for Your Marriage Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010	This book offers various enhancement skills for relationships including communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. It also emphasizes the importance of fun and friendship between couples and shows how these can lead to a healthy and happy relationship.
	Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work Gottman & Silver, 1999	This book is based on the research and clinical experience of Dr. John Gottman, who studied couples for years and turned his research and experience into a pathway for couples to succeed in their relationship. He offers principles of living to help couples stay together.
	Ten Lessons to Transform your Marriage	This book, also by noted relationship researcher Dr. John Gottman, underlines many of the common problem areas in relationships and marriages, and guides couples to strong

	Gottman, Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006	resolutions.
	The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts Chapman, 2015	This bestselling relationship book focuses on strategies to express love in a manner that is meaningful to one's partner (i.e. using their preferred "emotional love language"). Although the book is not evidence-based, many couples have responded positively.
	Lesbian Couples: A Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships Clunis & Green, 2004	Written for lesbian couples, this book discusses various relationship topics including living arrangements, commitment ceremonies and marriage, conflict resolution, coming out to others, monogamy, and bisexuality. Although now somewhat dated, it nevertheless provides lesbian couples with guidance on a number of relationship issues.
	Getting Past the Affair Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2007	This book is written for couples who have experienced infidelity, whether or not they are planning to stay together.
	10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do to Improve their Lives Kort, 2012	This book identifies the struggles gay men may go through in life and recommends different strategies that can enhance their life and relationships, and help them address the challenges of being gay in modern society.
	Get Closer: A Gay Men's Guide to Intimacy and Relationships Chernin, 2006	This book acts as a guide intended to help gay men focus on understanding themselves and how they interact in relationships, as opposed to solely focusing on the building blocks of the relationship itself.

Behavior Exchange for Couples Script—Chapter 15

Often when couples are having difficulty in their relationship, they focus a lot on the negatives or the problems that come up. Less and less time is spent in positive interactions that actually build up relationship strength and satisfaction. It sounds like this may be occurring in your relationship. As you've had more conflicts about money and friends, and you've become busier with work and kids, you've put less emphasis on showing each other you care in your everyday interactions. Many couples find that by intentionally planning and doing positive interactions, their satisfaction in the relationship increases. For example, each person might intentionally do something that demonstrates caring for the other several times each week, and then discuss its impact. Would you be interested in learning more about this strategy?