

FIGURE 16.1. Relationship Problems Sample Assessment Questions

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

FIGURE 16.2. Effective Listening Handout

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

- **Nonverbal 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 their thoughts uninterrupted and provides 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 you heard. This tells your partner you accurately understood what they were trying to communicate (whether or not you agree with the point or perspective).

FIGURE 16.3. Communication Practice Plan Handout

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 16.4. Problem-Solving Guidelines for Couples Handout

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 how the problem has impacted them. Partners should focus on one problem at a time and avoid accusations, arguing, or proposing solutions.
 - c) Partner B summarizes what was shared by Partner A, and then describes their own understanding of the issue. Partners should 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) The couple brainstorms potential solutions.
 - b) The 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 which situations.
3. Evaluate the solution.
 - a) The 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

1. Statement of the problem (developed jointly):

2. List of possible solutions (brainstorming):

3. 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.
4. Statement of solution (include who will do what, when, and in which situations):

5. Length of trial period: _____
6. Evaluation of solution: Did the solution work well enough? If yes, continue the plan developed above. If changes are needed, set aside time for joint problem solving to modify or improve the solution.

FIGURE 16.5. Behavior Exchange Handout

Taking Action to Show Your Partner You Care

Often when couples are having difficulties in their relationship, they do not 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 other 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 date with your partner when you will review progress, discuss what seemed to work well, and make changes and future plans: _____

FIGURE 16.6. Sample Intimate Partner Violence Safety Plan

My Safety Plan

- ☐ I will go to a safe area of the home if I am in danger. A safe area is an area of the home 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 a 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. This location is: _____

- ☐ Other: _____

FIGURE 16.7. Resources for Couples: Websites, Mobile Applications, and Books
(continues)

Type	Location	Description
Websites	National Domestic Violence Hotline Website (https://www.thehotline.org/)	Contains information on IPV, 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 (https://www.aamft.org/)	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 (https://www.helpguide.org/)	Offers a section on relationships, including advice for strengthening relationships, improving communication skills, increasing emotional intelligence, setting healthy boundaries, and resolving conflicts
	University of Minnesota: Taking Charge of Your Health and Well-Being (https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/relationships)	Contains information on healthy relationships; offers a number of strategies for couples in distress; and describes ways to nurture relationships, improve communication, practice forgiveness, and resolve conflict
	The Gottman Institute (https://www.gottman.com/)	Contains evidence-based information and resources for couples and professionals and provides links to additional resources and information on workshops for couples and trainings for professionals
Mobile application	The Gottman Institute Card Decks (https://www.gottman.com/couples/apps/)	Contains more than 1,000 virtual flashcards to help couples improve their relationship. It includes questions, statements, and ideas for relationship enhancement.
Books	<i>Fighting for Your Marriage: A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best-Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce</i> (Markman et al., 2010)	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.
	<i>The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work</i> (Gottman & Silver, 2015)	Book 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. The authors offer principles of living to help couples stay together.

FIGURE 16.7. Resources for Couples: Websites, Mobile Applications, and Books
(continued)

Type	Location	Description
Books (continued)	<i>What Makes Love Last? How to Build Trust and Avoid Betrayal</i> (Gottman & Silver, 2012)	Another book by noted relationship researcher Dr. John Gottman, provides strategies and tools for repairing and healing relationships that have been affected by betrayal
	<i>The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts</i> (Chapman, 2015)	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.
	<i>Working It Out: A Lesbian Relationship Primer</i> (Fuchs, 2009)	Interactive workbook focuses on improving lesbian relationships. It contains exercises to improve communication skills, manage conflicts, and address challenges related to coming out.
	<i>Ten Smart Things Gay Men Can Do to Improve Their Lives</i> , 2nd ed. (Kort, 2016)	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

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence.

Couples Agree Phase Script—Chapter 16

We've discussed several options available to you. I've shared my recommendation that we work together for several appointments to improve how the two of you communicate, particularly during conflicts. Mark, it sounds like you are in favor of this approach and would like to try it out. But Sarah, you're leaning more towards the self-help option, and are interested in working through a book with Mark on ideas for improving your marriage. Is that right? (Both nod in agreement). The choice is certainly up to you. The most important thing is that whichever option you select, both of you commit to giving it your best effort. And there is nothing wrong with choosing one approach, trying it out for a couple of months, and then evaluating how it's going and whether you'd like to try something else. Maybe to help make a decision you can both agree upon, we could discuss what each of you see as the pros and cons of both options, and what you'd be willing to try over the next two months.

Couples Rewarding Desired Behavior Script—Chapter 16

It sounds like Sarah feels very frustrated when you, Luis, come home from the gym and leave your gym bag and towel on the kitchen table. Sarah, you've responded by repeated reminders and sometimes yelling, but it doesn't seem to change his behavior. Luis, you have shared that you often "forget" and don't understand why this is such a "big deal." You also don't like when Sarah continually reminds you to clean up. Sarah, you said that Luis "occasionally" remembers to put his gym items in the laundry room but acknowledged that when he does so, you typically make sarcastic comments. I'm wondering if the two of you might be willing to try an experiment. Luis, your role would be to set a goal of putting your gym clothes in the laundry room each time. Perhaps you can attach something to your bag or place a note on the table to remind you. Sarah, your role is to "catch" Luis when he's following through on the plan and reward him, right then and there. It could be a smile and a "thank you," a kiss, or whatever else you think would work. What do you both think about trying this approach for the next two weeks? Let's talk a little more to flesh out the specifics of this plan.

Couples Behavior Exchange Description Script—Chapter 16

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?