

Great Communication, Great Sex



Discover how to communicate effectively through emotional pain and get back to passion.



Companion Workbook
Todd Creager LCSW, LMFT

GREAT COMMUNICATION, GREAT SEX

The Link between Emotional and Physical Intimacy

Our ancestors did not teach us how to communicate. When the going got tough (i.e., when conversations carried an emotional charge), what children typically witnessed was “fight or flight” reactions from one or both parents. “Fight” can include yelling, screaming, throwing things, punishment and abusiveness. “Flight” can include withdrawal, substance abuse and other addictive behaviors, abandonment, infidelity and other actions meant to avoid confrontation.

As these fight or flight reactions continue through a marriage, the partners increase their self-protective mechanisms. The goal: to protect oneself from imagined fears. The list includes fear of rejection, feeling inadequate, loss of love, humiliation, losing control or losing one’s individuality. These self-protective mechanisms have an effect on the body, and that effect can increase through time. Sexuality may diminish, accompanied by loss of desire or arousal in one or both partners.

The good news is that once a couple develops the emotional muscle to connect with one another EVEN through pain, it is highly likely that sexual feelings will increase. Miracles seem to happen within a relationship as partners replace their fight or flight tendencies with healthier, more mature patterns of connecting, such as staying open emotionally even to a complaining partner. Use this workbook and accompanying CD to develop healthy communication skills and experience these seemingly miraculous shifts in your relationship.

Awareness

It is always good to start at the beginning, so you need to be aware of how communication happened in your family. To complete the exercise below, circle the number on a scale of 1 to 5 that best represents how much healthy expression of feelings took place in your family. A score of 1 indicates poor or nonexistent expression of feelings, while a 5 indicates great freedom of expression. Write a few sentences that explain why you selected the number you did.

Awareness

Family

Freedom to Express Feelings

1 2 3 4 5

Getting more specific

Next, write about the kind of feelings that were expressed. In some families, the whole range of feelings was permissible, including sadness, disappointment, fear, anger, frustration, warmth, love and compassion. There are families where anger was the only emotion expressed and others where only positive feelings were expressed. In still others, there was little room for expression of positive feelings.

Listening

Rate your family on a scale of 1 to 5 on the level of constructive listening that went on. If you come from a family where there was very little or no freedom of expression, then the level of listening will, of course, be low. In families where there was freedom of expression, it usually – but not always – means there was more listening. Write a few sentences about why you chose that number.

Listening

1 2 3 4 5

Now look for clues about how you are as a partner. If you scored high on freedom of expression, it probably means you express yourself easily. If you scored low, you do not express yourself enough. Your partner may not feel close to you, and some of his or her complaints may stem from this feeling of distance.

Sometimes partners fight about petty things. Underneath, what is really going on is a disconnect between the two of you. Keep in mind the kind of feelings your family expressed, and those it didn't. Unless we become more aware, we repeat old patterns in our current relationships. For example, if only anger was communicated in your family, it may be difficult for you to express feelings of hurt, sadness, fear or disappointment to your partner. These are often precursors to anger. In other words, some of these softer feelings are actually your primary feelings. The anger is a reaction to these feelings, which never get communicated.

Locating your feelings

Before you express your feelings, you must learn to locate those feelings in your body, because that is where we experience them. Many of us live more in our heads. This means we focus our attention on our thoughts and superficial self-protective reactions, and we do not even notice what is going on in our bodies.

How to locate your feelings

Focus on your heart area and notice any pleasant or unpleasant sensations there. If you feel neutral, think of a pleasant or unpleasant recent experience and pay attention to your heart area. See if you feel a shift in energy. Another way to evoke feelings is to look into your partner's eyes and notice what you feel in your heart area. Some of these feelings might be sadness, guilt, warmth or compassion.

Focus on your stomach area and notice any pleasant or unpleasant feelings there. If you need to evoke some feelings, try one of the exercises I suggested for the heart area. What you feel in your stomach area could be fear, frustration, inferiority, shame or peace. (Not everyone experiences the same feelings, so don't make any assumptions. Just notice what is true for you).

If this exercise is difficult for you, start out by noticing only whether you are tense or relaxed. You can try to identify some of the other feelings later. Sometimes tension is a protective mechanism to avoid what could be categorized as more "vulnerable" feelings.

Write down what you notice about your emotions as you locate them in your body. Include, if you can, any memories you have of experiencing these feelings as a child.

Once you've practiced identifying your feelings, you can move on to steps two (Expressing Feelings) and three (Listening to Feelings). We will combine these two, as they are largely inseparable. We will call this: **How to have healthy, caring, courageous dialogues that lead to more alive, passionate relationships!**

Keys to Expressing Feelings Constructively

Practice clean communication

Definition: Clean communication occurs when the **only** agenda for speaking is to **inform** your partner about what is going on in your inner world.

Example: "I am angry with you for what you did."

Most people do not communicate cleanly when in emotionally charged conversations. They have one or more of the following agendas:

- Blaming: "You are the worst listener I know."
- Punishing: "Just wait and see when I'll want sex with you again. Like maybe never!"
- Tension reduction: "F--- you!"
- Defending: "I do so much for you, and you only see the negative."

Tips on clean communication:

- Make "I" statements instead of starting the sentence with "you."
- You can say this: "I am angry at you." Don't say this: "You cause such problems around here."
- Don't speak in a monotone. Rather, modulate your tone and volume.
- If you speak too loudly, quickly or harshly, your partner will be less apt to listen and more apt to defend because he will feel like he is being

attacked. You can increase your chances of being heard by speaking firmly and directly; but treat your partner as an ally who needs to be informed, not an enemy who has to be conquered.

Listening

Go back to how you rated your family regarding listening. If you were listened to, you may have been more apt to express yourself. Note, however, that some families express, but nobody is really listening. The good news: In families that listened (still too much of a rarity), people will typically express themselves more because expressing was rewarded.

If you come from such a family, you probably express yourself easily to your partner and are a decent listener. If your family scored lower in this category, chances are that you need to develop listening skills. Begin asking questions of others and practicing listening; mirror the other person instead of coming back with your own thoughts. (I'll address mirroring later in this workbook)

Below are samples of three levels of questions to ask your intimate partner:

1. Small-talk questions
2. Questions about feelings
3. Deeper questions

Small-talk questions are great because they demonstrate interest and curiosity. Typically, these questions are easy to answer.

Feelings-level questions promote conversational intimacy. Such intimacy allows each partner to open up and discover emotions and sensations the body is experiencing as the conversation continues.

As the couple get more connected emotionally, partners can ask some of the "going even deeper" questions. Using such questions, the happiest partners become confidantes.

Small-talk questions:

- What is your favorite movie of all time and why?
- If you could move anywhere you wanted to, where would you live and why?
- What is your most pleasant childhood memory?
- What is your most unpleasant childhood memory?
- What hobby would you like to engage in that you haven't yet tried?

Feelings questions:

- How are you feeling about our relationship right now?
- How have you been feeling lately about your career?
- How are you feeling about the fight we had last night?
- What are you most appreciative about in your life?
- What are your feelings regarding your sister these days?

Going even deeper questions:

- What are you ashamed of that you have not told anyone?
- What is your secret sexual fantasy?
- Is there someone you are infatuated with, and what about that person makes you feel that way?
- If you were to do it all again, what would you do differently and why?
- What are some thoughts you have about me that stop you from increasing your capacity to give love to and receive love from me?

Asking the above questions is an important first part of listening skills. Of course, sometimes your partner will express himself or herself without being asked. However, asking these questions places you in a "leadership" role, where you lead the dialogue (and relationship) into more connected patterns.

Other important aspects of listening:

Get into a receptive state of mind

This is **crucial**. Once you are in a receptive state, the listening tasks I describe below become almost effortless. You won't achieve that receptive state, however, until you make a decision to give up your own agenda as your partner speaks. Allow your muscles to relax; give up (temporarily, at least) any impulse

to convince, correct, defend or punish. To relax even further, breathe deeply into your abdomen and exhale all the way out.

The next few minutes are all about your partner's inner experience and not at all about you and your wishes, thoughts or feelings. Your time will come. You can practice being in this receptive state by taking in the beauty of a flower, the beautiful sounds of your favorite music or the warmth of the sun on your face. There is no agenda; you just have to notice and attend to the experience. Men often have trouble with this because we have been taught to act and solve problems – but do not underestimate the importance of shifting into this receptive state on a consistent basis.

Other crucial skills of listening

Practice mirroring: Repeat the words just said back to the person who said them.

Example:

Partner 1: “I am angry at you for undermining me with the kids.”

Partner 2: (mirroring): “So, you are angry at me for undermining you with the kids.”

Practice validating: Look for agreement even if you do not agree 100 percent.

Example: “I can see why you would be angry with me for undermining you with the kids because I disagreed with you right in front of them.”

Practice empathy: Go deeper inside yourself to imagine and get in touch with what your partner may be feeling.

Example: “I know that feeling. Here you are trying to be the best parent you can be, and then I undo what you are trying to accomplish. I would feel frustrated and maybe even betrayed. Is that how you feel?”

Ask clarification questions: Don't assume you know what your partner means. Check it out.

Example: “When you say you want more time with me, are you saying you want more dates or more time at home?”

Ask deepening questions: Your intent is to have your partner explore his or her inner world more deeply. In the movie *Shrek*, the ogre says to the donkey, “We are like an onion.” He is right. You peel one layer, and then there is another. Keep this in mind and be a co-archeologist with your partner. You may discover buried treasure!

Example 1: “You say you are sad about what I said earlier today. Tell me more about that.”

Example 2: “You say you are sad about what I said earlier today. Does that remind you of how your dad treated you when you were a child?”

You probably don’t have any experience communicating in this way. So be patient. Allow for relapses of old, bad habits and keep on practicing the new behaviors. This is a new exercise, analogous to going to the gym and working out with weights. As you lift weights on a regular basis, your muscles increase in size, and you feel stronger. As you practice communication, you develop emotional muscle.

Emotional muscle increases when you:

- Hear your partner and, instead of reacting to whatever that provokes in your body, continue to listen actively.
- Ask a clarification question or a deepening question when a part of you wants to respond with a fight or flight reaction.
- Wait your turn.
- Practice clean communication.

Learn to Play Catch

Playing catch is a metaphor for couples learning how to express and listen to each other’s feelings and desires. Practicing the skills above will lead to productive, joyful and loving games of catch with your partner.

Locating and identifying your feelings and expressing them cleanly are akin to throwing a ball so your partner can catch it. Yelling and blaming is like throwing a ball so hard your partner not only cannot catch it but also has to mount a defense so he or she won’t get hurt. The catcher probably will just raise his or her arms and block the ball.

A partner who is truly listening puts on a metaphoric baseball glove and catches the ball. That creates a satisfying feeling in the partner who threw the ball. If the partner who's supposed to catch the ball defends herself, it is like slapping the ball back at the thrower. If the partner is non-responsive, she might as well have watched the ball drop at her feet -- which is unsatisfying to the thrower. Men who learn to catch the ball are more confident, and women are more trusting.

Exercise: Listening workout

Pick an emotionally charged subject -- but not too emotionally charged if you are just beginning to practice listening. Then:

- Focus your attention on your partner and what he or she is expressing to you.
- Give him or her verbal or nonverbal indication that you are listening, such as saying "uh-huh" or nodding.
- If you get defensive, stop and self-soothe by breathing deeply into your abdomen and exhaling all the way out, as previously described on p.9 in the section on developing a receptive state of mind. That will relax your muscles and help you re-enter the receptive state.
- Continue as you did in the exercise on locating your feelings. (Page 5)

Exercise: Learn to play catch

Sit across from each other, making sure there are no distractions in the external environment. Choose an emotionally charged subject. Each person will get a chance to throw and catch.

The expresser's sole purpose is to inform his or her partner of what he or she is experiencing. Only the person playing the role of expresser gets to talk about him or herself. The partner's turn comes only after the expresser feels totally heard and listened to.

The listener's purpose is twofold: to listen and look for agreement. The listener's job is to be a good journalist. A good journalist finds out as much information as possible and checks to make sure he or she has gotten the story correct.

Your partner will let you know if you've gotten the story right. If not, the expresser needs to tell the story again in a slightly different way. When he or she feels totally heard, it's time for the partner to take a turn as expresser.

Exercise: How to heal from a fractured communication

Think of the last conversation you had with your spouse where you reacted because your emotional buttons got pushed. Think about which fear was triggered. Ask your partner to have that conversation with you again. Tell him or her you want to do a better job of listening. The key: Decide to contain your reaction; endure your temporary emotional pain and stay connected to your partner. Avoid your earlier, unconscious intention to avoid listening.

Exercise: How to face a topic or interaction you have been avoiding

(Advanced)

Pick a topic that you avoid discussing with your spouse. Ask your partner if he or she is willing to have a conversation about this difficult subject. If your partner says yes, remember that no matter what you feel as you have this conversation, you can self-soothe and breathe through your feelings. Do not work too hard to convince your partner of something or expect a particular outcome.

Decide in advance on a signal, such as a "time out" signal, to be used if things get heated. Typically, no matter how difficult the topic is, if you are loving and sensitive to your partner, things usually will turn out OK. If the conversation gets too heated and you need to use your signal, give each other a couple of minutes to relax and calm down before resuming the discussion.

Another way to develop emotional muscle is to hold your partner's hand while having this conversation about a difficult topic. This is challenging because, when feeling unpleasant emotions, we typically act accordingly, giving our feelings power over our actions. Holding my partner's hand signifies that, while I may feel negative feelings, those feelings do not disrupt my underlying love for him or her. Once both of you feel as though you've been heard, see if you can hug each other to further emphasize that your emotional connection is strong, no matter what you are feeling.

Exercise: Practice mirroring

As basic as the technique of mirroring is, it is not easy because of the human tendency to interrupt, defend and react. Practicing mirroring helps you develop patience, as you learn to wait your turn and evoke in your partner the feeling that he or she matters.

Take turns expressing and mirroring with your partner. Bring up a topic with some emotional charge and have the other person repeat your words back to you. Then switch roles. Do this for about five minutes, and make sure you give up the goal of fixing the problem. This is just about mirroring.

Exercise: Practice validation

The biggest mistake couples make is that they go after the truth. The problem is that each partner believes his or her version of the truth, and those versions can differ widely. In 28 years of marriage, I cannot remember a single time BEFORE I learned effective listening when I was able to change my wife's opinion. When your partner is emotionally charged, instead of going after the truth, as you know it, find something in your partner's perspective that you CAN agree with.

Spend 10 to 20 minutes on this exercise. One person starts by expressing something that was a topic of debate between you in the past. Look for something you can agree with, even if it is just a small fraction of the truth as you see it. Let your partner respond to your validation. You can mix mirroring into this exercise as well. After your partner feels complete (you can ask whether he or she feels finished), switch roles.

Example of validation or looking for agreement:

Partner 1: "You never listen to me." (Not recommended because words like "never" and "always" can be inflammatory)

Partner 2: "Yes, there are definitely times like just now that I don't listen to you."

Basic exercise to deepen communication

This is also known as the “Tell Me More” exercise.

You both decide to be archeologists and discover what may be lurking in the emotional world of your partner.

One partner expresses a feeling or desire. The listener (who has allowed himself to get into a receptive state of mind) maintains eye contact with the partner and sincerely says, “Tell me more.” The expressive partner says something else, and the listening partner once again says, “Tell me more.” This continues until the expresser says, “Nothing more for now.” This simple but powerful exercise permits deep discovery and sharing.

Advanced exercise to deepen communication

In this exercise, you combine “Tell Me More” with empathy. In addition to taking the listener’s role in “Tell Me More,” ask yourself what you might be feeling if you were in your partner’s shoes. Feel that feeling as much as you can. From that place of empathy, maintain eye contact and ask her to tell you more. When you combine the request for more information with empathy, it triggers a subliminal connection and deeper communication.

Nonverbal and Verbal Communication Create Intensity and Closeness

Healthy communication can do two wonderful things. First, it can help couples understand one another better, which leads to a warmer, more loving relationship. We have been covering that at length in this workbook. Second, communication can lift a relationship to a more loving, passionate and even adventurous experience for both partners. This can be accomplished both with and without words. In fact, well over half of communication between two people is nonverbal. The way you look at each other matters, as do your posture, facial expressions, tone and volume. Yes, communication can definitely lead to passionate, hot intimacy.

Ways to create emotional intensity

Nonverbal intensity

- Look deeply into your partner's eyes.
- Smile.
- Use facial expressions to flirt or let him or her know that you find him or her attractive.
- Touch slowly, and caress lovingly.
- Hug often, and make sure the hugs are longer than in the past.

Think of other ways you choose to create interpersonal intensity nonverbally.

NOW GO DO IT!!!!

Verbal intensity:

- Share something difficult to share about you. That's right -- expose yourself! Relationships require some boldness.
- Say those magic three words, and say them with feeling and expression.
- Use words with the intention of lifting your partner's spirits to the heavens. Think of one absolutely wonderful thing about your partner, tell him or her what you are thinking – and say it with heart and with emphasis.
- Share a painful feeling, but do it with the thought that your partner is your ally. You can even express anger lovingly. (See the aforementioned explanation of clean communication on page 7.)
- Find something about your partner that turns you on, and tell him or her about it.

What it takes for real success

Aim for 10 minutes a day (minimum) of conversations to develop emotional connection. Some couples set a standard time in the evening, when they know they will come together and have a conversation to promote intensity and closeness.

Don't expect to get it right immediately; it takes time to develop the emotional muscle needed.

Unite against the common enemy of the status quo. That is, stop seeing one another as the enemy. You were both doing the best you could. Now it is time to **experiment** with new ways of communicating. Help each other out when one of you slips into an old pattern, which is inevitable.

Accept each other's differences. (You'll find a more detailed discussion of this on the CD.)

Next, similarities and differences between men and women are discussed. This is important because the more we appreciate and understand our differences, the more we can bridge the gap and maintain close, loving and compassionate connections. However, it is important to state the following points:

- 1) Sometimes the differences between men and women are more pronounced and sometimes far less pronounced.
- 2) On occasion, I have noticed some role reversals where, for example, the man is more emotional and sentimental and the woman is more logical. (See below)
- 3) There are always differences in homosexual relationships as well. These differences in gay relationships create the necessary polarity of attraction. Just like in straight relationships, sometimes the differences between partners are very pronounced and with others, less pronounced. However just as I describe in the heterosexual relationships below, there are always differences.
- 4) Having said that, in gay male relationships, there can be problems unique to them because gay men were socialized to have the patterns

of all men. Thus, similarities can cause their own unique problems. For example, men often have trouble being vulnerable. Two male partners sometimes will have great difficulty being vulnerable because of how they were socialized.

- 5) Likewise, in lesbian relationships, they often have an easier time discussing feelings, which can be a communication advantage. In lesbian relationships where differences are more pronounced, one female for example may be very logical and problem solving oriented while the other is more emotional and feelings-oriented. On rare occasions, I have seen the similarities be a disadvantage when there is too much of an imbalance towards emotionality/feelings and a lack of logic/problem solving.
- 6) To summarize, as you look at the differences below, (whether straight or gay), know that there is variance between partners and embrace being the unique person you are. Despite gender or sexual preference, the most important point is to notice how you are different than your partner and choose to embrace the differences.

How are men and women in heterosexual relationships similar?

Both need to get their important emotional needs met.

Both have feelings.

Both need to feel validated and loved.

Write about how you are similar to your partner in the ways mentioned above and any other ways you can think of.

How are men and women in heterosexual relationships different?

WOMEN:

- She lives more in her feelings.
- She needs to feel what it is like to express her feelings, desires and sensations to a receptive partner.
- She needs to experience receiving his authentic, honest feelings, desires and sensations.
- She needs his emotional attention and presence.
- She needs to feel cherished.
- Sexually, she is more like a crockpot. That is, she heats up more slowly than her partner.

MEN:

- He needs to feel adequate.
- He wants to make a positive impact.
- He wants to solve problems.
- He lives more in his mind.
- Sexually, he is more like a microwave. He gets hot in a hurry.

Write about the differences you notice between your partner and yourself; the ones mentioned and any others you can think of. Come from a state of acceptance of these differences as you write them down.

Successful couples find ways to bridge the differences between them.

Bridging the gap

You need to develop your weakest link. Do not be afraid to work on the weaker, less-developed areas of your personality/psyche. Men, especially, need to develop their feeling skills.

Women in heterosexual relationships need to view the man as a work in progress as he develops his feeling skills.

Women need to understand that men ARE different. They generally have a harder time being vulnerable.

Men need to understand that women thrive when they hear from their partner about feelings and that it's also important for men to express those feelings.

If you need more inspiration to practice your communication skills, there is scientific evidence linking healthy communication and hot intimacy.

The Mind/Body Connection

Desire is felt in the body, and so is pain.

As you learn to deal more maturely with pain, the body opens up and relaxes, and each of you is freer to be yourself. It's logical that if the heart opens up, other parts of the anatomy open up along with it.

Hormones play a big part in desire and intimacy. Significant research shows that the hormone *oxytocin* is linked with arousal, decreased anxiety and pleasurable feelings in the female. The research indicates that planned romance and -- you guessed it -- communication about feelings increase the oxytocin level in the female. So, what are you waiting for? Start communicating!

Likewise, men thrive when their testosterone levels are higher. When does testosterone seem to rise? Studies show that when a man feels like he has had a positive impact or accomplished something, his testosterone goes up. So show him you are appreciative of his efforts!

Having a healthy game of emotional catch with your partner could very well increase the oxytocin in the female and the testosterone in the male. Also, humans are not selective stuffers. That means if we stuff our pain, we will stuff our good stuff, too, including our enthusiasm, passion and attraction.

By contrast, if we express our pain, all channels seem to open up. Plus, open communication relaxes the body, opens the heart and the vagina, brings on feelings of warmth, and paves the way for physical attraction and intimacy.

*May you -- female partner -- feel cherished;
may you -- male partner -- feel capable and
influential; and may you both have the
relationship of your dreams!*



Congratulations! You have mastered the basics of effective communication to get through the pain and to the passion.

To keep from falling back into your old patterns, book your companion session with me right away at Todd@ToddCreager.com to support you on your journey.

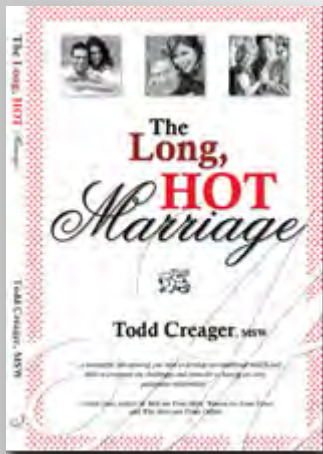
About Todd Creager

Todd Creager is a marriage and sex therapist that helps individuals and couples rekindle passion. He has a talent for helping people become motivated to create new patterns in their lives that lead to more satisfying relationships and experiences. He is the author of “The Long, Hot Marriage” a highly regarded and practical book that will help you see your relationship more clearly and it gives you exercises that will help you develop the emotional muscle to bring the best out of your partner and yourself. The feedback of the book has been remarkable!

He also trains others in the field of psychotherapy. He is an instructor at the USC School of Social Work, helping students learn the theory and practice of becoming professional therapists. He also does many other trainings where he instructs therapists in the field of marriage and sex therapy. He has been a guest as a relationship expert on many radio and TV shows including the FOX Morning News, Playboy Radio, the Mancow Muller Show and many others.

Order the Long, Hot Marriage at:

www.toddcreager.com



Todd Creager, LCSW, LMFT

16052 Beach Blvd. Suite 214

Huntington Beach, CA 92647

(714) 848-2288

todd@toddcreager.com

