



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling**

## **Communication Errors/Problems in Couples and Families**

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Communication errors often lead to conflicts in couples and families, or they can exacerbate existing conflicts. Conflict management, or the ways in which family members deal with conflict, can be negatively impacted by communication errors and problems that impede possibilities for conflict resolution and relationship repair. Relationship outcomes for romantic partnerships are consistently linked with the ways in which the couple communicate with one another. Specifically, as it relates to conflict, communication between romantic partners predicts the satisfaction and stability of the relationship. This is particularly important when couples have children, as they learn communication from their families of origin. What this means is that children learn how to communicate on the basis of observing and interacting with family members; generally, the way that parents communicate will be replicated by their children. Spouses who engage in communication that is marked by errors and problems are, in effect, likely teaching their children how to repeat the same patterns of poor communication. Couples counselors and family therapists need to intervene when this occurs, teaching the family new, more effective means of communication. This entry provides an overview of communication errors, both verbal and nonverbal; specific approaches to intervention, including those of John Gottman and Virginia Satir, are also presented.

Communication errors and problems often exist when there are gaps in between intentions and perceptions. What this means is that when an individual communicates with another, he or she *intends* for a certain message to be conveyed. However, the way that message is *perceived* depends on the other family member engaged in the conversation. When there is a difference between the intention of a message and its perceived meaning, communication errors occur. Communication errors also occur when family members fail to empathize with one another, meaning that they are not taking into account other family members' perspective and worldview; instead they focus solely on the self. Communication problems also happen when family members have different ways or methods of communicating with one another. Couples counselors and marriage and family therapists should never assume that all members of one family engage in similar means of communication. This is especially true in the case of blended families. Spouses may come from varying backgrounds, cultures, religions, or ethnicities, and family members are likely to have different personalities and levels of development, which will affect how they communicate. For example, the individual who is introverted and focuses on emotions will probably communicate differently than the individual who is extroverted and focuses on cognitions and reasoning. When one person communicates from a state of feeling and another communicates from a state of cognition or behavior, it is as if they are speaking two different languages. Couples counselors and marriage and family therapists have to do their best to act as translators. Additionally, children communicate differently from adults because they are in different stages of life span development. Accordingly, children should not be treated as little adults; family therapists must adapt their approaches to understanding and addressing communication errors and problems among children within client families.

Communication errors do not only result from different ways of communicating; rather, the topic of discussion itself can promote problems in communication. Topics considered to be of significant importance may include finances, issues balancing work and family, marital infidelity, parenting styles, relationships with in-laws, or quality of the spousal sexual relationship. These topics are likely to escalate from simple discussions to blowout arguments with certain couples or family members. Discussion surrounding topics that carry more weight are more likely to provide stimulus and opportunity for poor communication behaviors to occur. When this happens, couples counselors and marriage and family therapists often act as referees, mediating the situation and encouraging healthier communication patterns

among family members.

Communication errors and problems can be verbal or nonverbal in nature; this entry discusses both types. Included in the section on nonverbal communication errors are attending skills, facial expressions, paralanguage, body language, and eye contact. This entry does not, however, include information regarding domestic and intimate partner violence, as those behaviors go beyond the scope of typical communication errors and problems in couples and families and must be addressed differently by couples counselors and marriage and family therapists.

### Verbal Communication Errors

The simplest verbal communication error is *not* using one's verbal communication skills clearly during times of conflict. Clamming up and not addressing an issue of concern with a loved family member can breed contempt and lead to breakdown of the quality of the relationship. Couples counselors and marriage and family therapists encourage client families to openly communicate their wants and needs with one another, whether they are experiencing conflict or not. Simply closing the lines of communication will not lead to conflict resolution or relationship repair. Another error in verbal communication occurs when individuals think that by using "I" statements, they have carte blanche with the content of their messages (e.g., "I feel like you are a jerk."). Putting an "I" statement into a sentence does not mitigate a harsh message. Verbal communication, when overused, can also result in problems. When family members speak over one another, interrupt, and try to talk at the same time, functional communication will not occur.

### Gottman's Categories of Flawed Communication

John Gottman established four categories of flawed communication patterns in romantic partnerships: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. He found that these four styles of communicating ("Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse") are toxic to romantic partnerships, leading to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution. Criticism occurs when one partner blames the other for a negative situation (or attributes its cause to characteristics internal to the partner) instead of blaming oneself, the situation itself, or a factor external to the partner or relationship. Criticism also involves putting down one's partner, effectively disempowering him or her by listing negative comments or making accusatory statements. Defensiveness, the second of the four horsemen, is a common reaction to criticism. Defensiveness manifests as self-protection, counterattacking one's partner, making excuses for one's behavior, and denying responsibility for relationship conflict. Contempt occurs when one partner expresses disgust for the other partner, with the aim of causing psychological pain. Contempt may be experienced when one partner feels nagged by the other partner, or that the other partner is putting too many demands upon her or him. Contempt can occur through both verbal (e.g., name calling, mockery, insulting one's partner) and nonverbal (e.g., rolling one's eyes, making rude hand gestures, making faces) means and usually signifies a lack of respect for one's romantic partner. Stonewalling, the fourth horseman, occurs when one partner withdraws from the other, either physically, emotionally, or both. Stonewalling can include withholding of expressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from one's partner in both positive and negative areas. The partner who physically leaves the residence in response to a conflict is stonewalling, as is the partner who emotionally withdraws from a conflict without first reaching a solution.

### Satir's Communication Stances

Virginia Satir distinguished types of communication stances that people tend to adopt under stress and during times of conflict that are problematic: placating, blaming, distraction, and "the computer" (i.e., super reasonable). The family member who placates is a people-pleaser and mediates family conflict, typically putting other family members first and often blaming oneself for family problems. Out of fear of rejection the placater does not disagree with other family members but instead, seeking approval, always agrees with them. The family member who blames will put the onus for problems on other family members but will usually take responsibility when there is success in the family. A fault-finder tries to control others through showing dominance; the blamer disagrees with others indiscriminately, acts critically toward them, and is likely to feel superior when compared with the rest of the family. The blamer will do whatever is necessary to preserve feelings of self-worth and does not like being challenged. The family member who is the distraction pretends that the stress is not there and may engage in tangential refocusing (i.e., doing things to take the focus off the family conflict). The distractor acts in ways and speaks about things irrelevant to the situation. The distractor's role is to provide the family with comfort during uncomfortable situations (such as conflict) and shift the family's focus to something less stressful and painful. The family member who is the computer is super reasonable and will bypass affect and go straight to reason and logic, seemingly unaffected by, or uninvolved in, the family conflict. The computer may lack emotion if she or he is cut off from feelings, socially distances or isolates himself or herself, and is likely to minimize reactions to family conflict. The hyper-reasonable individual works to control his or her emotions and place conflict into a manageable context.

### Nonverbal Communication Errors

Communication errors and problems can occur when family members do not use simple attending skills with one another (e.g., active listening, making eye contact); these are often taught or modeled appropriately by the couples counselor and marriage and family therapist. When family members do not attend to one another, they are usually not being sensitive or responsive, often appearing uninterested in the conversation. Inappropriate use of nonverbal communication creates problems as well. When a family member is annoyed with another individual, calmly explaining one's feelings is preferred to negative facial expressions (e.g., overtly rolling one's eyes and sticking out one's tongue) in an effort to mock the other family member. The improper use of paralanguage, or vocal qualities, can also negatively impact family communication, causing problems to exist. Raising the volume of one's voice or changing one's vocal tone to that of disdain can drastically impact the direction of a conversation. It is worth noting that conflict does not necessarily have to escalate to the point of yelling; conflict can be discussed calmly and at a quiet volume. Also, consider how impactful body language is in communication errors and problems: The individual who chooses to loom over another family member, arms crossed and pointing his/her forefinger, is communicating a more threatening message than the individual who communicates while sitting and maintaining an open posture and using neutral (or positive) gestures. Eye contact is indicative of engagement; lack of eye contact during family communication shows possible lack of involvement in the discussion. Also, misusing eye contact is a communication problem (e.g., staring down a family member in order to intimidate). One's general behavior is also highly indicative of communication problems in couples and families. For example, if a parent requests a change in his or her child's behavior, failure to comply with that request indicates the existence of some kind of communication problem.

*Rebecca M. Goldberg*

**See also** [Boundaries](#); [Conflict Styles](#); [Decision-Making](#); [Gottman Method Couples Therapy](#); [Metacommunication](#); [Nonverbal Communication](#); [Scapegoating](#)

### Further Readings

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