

## Reflective Listening for Couples

Practice reflective listening in your relationship for better communication.

A few reasons why couples argue and struggle to communicate well:

Real-world issues: different opinions on finances, family, raising children, and things going on within the home.

Attachment issues: this can be presented as couples fighting about how they fight.

Communication itself: a person has lack of empathy, when people don't really listen, and when people are defensive.

Let's just focus on addressing the communication itself:

In unhealthy communication:

If it's important enough for couples to fight over, then it's important to work on it. A healthy couple listens to their partner's concerns. If it matters to one person, then it's worth the time needed for the other person to understand.

In unhealthy communication, people spend a lot of their energy getting their point across and defending themselves. They don't actively hear out the other person, instead they are figuring out what to say next.

Reflective listening:

Reflective listening is about finding out what's actually occurring on a deeper level for the other person.

Think of it as being a third person, where you are no longer in the problem, you're working together to solve it. "Us verse the problem," not "me verse you verse the problem."

An example, one spouse might say, in a relieved and uplifted tone of voice, *"I didn't you we're thinking that."* or *"I had no idea, and it makes me feel disheartened to hear you felt that way"*.

How to do reflective listening:

Reflective listening is a slowed down conversation, which requires time and paying attention. It increases awareness to the situation.



The couple needs to approach this exercise with a real desire to resolve an issue and a willingness to actively listen. Listen to learn and understand.

They need to be willing to try to experience what the other person is feeling as they speak, and being open and honest about those feelings. This might be the most challenging part; acknowledging, experiencing, and coping with the stronger emotions.

This exercise helps build trust.

The exercise:

Because it's a conversation, one person is the speaker and the other is the listener. One chooses to speak first while the other listens. Later, the roles are swapped.

The speaker chooses a topic and may start with: *"I'd like to talk about ..."*.

The speaker uses one short sentence at a time. It needs to be short because the other person has to repeat it and feel what it's like, and it also prevents long-winded monologues and emotions from rising.

The listener only listens, and when the person who is speaking is finished with their sentence, then the listener repeats back what they heard: *"What I heard you say was..."*.

\*The listener is not allowed to embellish or give their side to the argument, that comes later.\*

The speaker continues and corrects the listener if what they heard wasn't what they said. *"What I actually said was..."* or *"That's not quite right, I said..."*.

\*The listener's role is important, and they should stay aware and involved. Robotically repeating what the speaker is saying does not work.\*

The speaking and listening arrangement continues until the speaker has finished what they wanted to say and feels heard and understood.

Swap roles:

The speaker becomes the listener and the listener becomes the speaker.

Repeat the speaking and listening arrangement.

After the second speaker is finished and feels heard and understood, the first speaker may want to go again. This activity continues in an open-ended manner until they have completed what they wanted to say and feel they have been heard correctly.



Reflective listening is a way of checking-in with ourselves because the slowed down communication allows us to have the time to reflect on what is most important. We actively listen, giving time to understand and connect on a deeper level with our partner.

From start to end, this exercise may take 5 to 30 minutes.

What to avoid doing:

- The listener should not be thinking about what you want to say while they're supposed to be listening.
- Don't push for an outcome.
- Be respectful, don't interrupt.
- Avoid summarizing or robotically repeating back what you've heard.
- Avoid disagreement with the speaker, until it is your turn to be the speaker.

Practice this exercise:

This exercise becomes easier the more that it is practiced. Check-in when you are unsure that you understand what is happening for your partner; or you can ask your partner to reflect back what you have said, if you feel it is important and want to make sure they are not making assumptions or jumping to conclusions. It may take some time and practice at the beginning, but it is well worth the effort. Talking becomes safer and trust is built up.

Keep in mind, that when some people first start practicing reflective listening, they might have difficulty breaking their own negative habits like interrupting, dismissing, and rushing to fix a problem with a solution.

When this exercise becomes familiar, then it can be used just to check that you have really understood what is happening for the other person. Another benefit is that it saves you from arguing and the emotional pain that arguing causes.

Reflective listening is a way of showing that you want to problem solve together and improve communication.

