

Communication in Relationships and Relationship Counselling

An interview with Julie Twohig

By Kate Langmore

Communication is something many of us undertake all day. We talk to our children, our colleagues, our friends and family and strangers. We communicate with words and body language, with the telephone, the Internet, with documents, media and art. We communicate so often it is easy to give it little thought. The Relationships Australia website states: "We are so used to communication with others that we forget how complicated it can be."

According to the Macquarie dictionary to communicate is to convey one's feelings, thoughts etc. successfully to others. It sounds so easy. And yet the inability to do just this in a relationship is not only common, research suggests it is the number one cause of relationship breakdown.

"Good communication is the basis of relationship intimacy and connectivity," says psychotherapist, relationship counsellor and author, Julie Twohig. A lack of this intimacy and connection, she suggests, is the most common trigger for relationship problems. It leads to a prevailing sense of needs being unmet and ultimately, resentment and withdrawal.

Most of us are pretty clear that good communication is important to a healthy relationship, but that doesn't mean we remember to leave time for it, and it certainly doesn't mean we always manage to do it 'successfully'. So how can we communicate better with our partner?

Twohig suggests that "good will" is an essential ingredient to successful communication and an intimate relationship. "A metaphor for good will is a garden," explains Twohig. "We water, weed, prune, mulch, pick the blossoms... in short, we attend and care for our garden, or it wilts and dies. A relationship requires the same level of nurture – yet we often neglect to attend to the garden."

Yet such neglect can be destructive. "Good will runs dry rapidly, and it can often seem impossible to know how to build the bridge to create connection again," says Twohig.

Another crucial approach to communication – and especially when entering difficult territory – is the use of "I" in the dialogue. To own your need, says Twohig. For example: "I have something I would like us to talk about, and I know it's a tricky subject for us, but it would mean a lot to me if we could have this discussion. Is now a good time, or is there another time that would be better?"

Using "I" instead of "you" is a way of raising issues and letting your partner know what you're thinking and feeling without directly attacking them.

It's also important to be aware of body language when discussing more tricky issues. If our arms are crossed and our body language is defensive, or our voice is

aggressive, our partner may take in and respond to these signals more than to what we are saying.

It can also be a good idea to choose an appropriate time for communication. In bed when you're both tired, or at times when you're both busy or preoccupied or are surrounded by possible interruptions won't be as effective as a quiet time when you both feel relaxed.

If intimate communication, or certain subjects in particular, make your partner uncomfortable or defensive, try not to become defensive in response. Try to stay grounded, suggests Twohig, and let them know you are not trying to criticize or fight.

Make sure you aren't attacking them or acting righteous. Then let them know it's crucial to the relationship that you can share how you feel. "Communication is akin to opening a metaphoric window and saying to our partner: You are important to me, I care about you, and I want to show you how I am feeling/what I am experiencing in my inner world/being," says Twohig.

"It is the ability to see/hear and to be seen – even when what we are showing/seeing is, at times, confronting."

It can be tempting to sidestep the tricky talks and avoid the vulnerability involved in initiating intimate conversations, but it seems the rewards will by far outweigh the initial discomfort and teething problems. "It's a bit like learning a new language," says Twohig. "Difficult at first, but when you get it, it gives you infinitely more freedom to navigate your way."

After all, we are bound to have differences with our partner and face challenges in the relationship, but it is not these issues in themselves but how we deal with them that is important and will help steer the success of the relationship.

Breakout box: Couples counselling

It may feel drastic to suggest couples counselling to your partner, but according to Julie Twohig, it's never too early to go. "It should be called 'Life Skills'," says Twohig. If you do wait until problems occur, "it's better to seek counselling sooner rather than later," adds Twohig.

According to Relationships Australia, counselling can help a couple to: understand the relationship they have; discover why they chose each other in the first place; find out what they wanted from their relationship and from each other; understand how they contributed to whatever their relationship has become; discuss what they feel about each other now; and discuss what they are prepared to do to make it work.

At a relationship counselling session, there may be a teaching/coaching focus where some rules will be laid down such as not interrupting each other or making each other feel invalid. There will be a gathering of information and each person will be able to give their perspective on issues raised. "It's essential as a couple to learn to listen to each other's truth – even when it's different from our own," says Twohig. Examples will be used to tease out various grievances. "An enormous amount can be learnt/achieved by way of one typical or small

example, in terms of the couple dynamic." By the end, Twohig finds that "couples are generally amazed that it's taken this long to discover these basic but fundamental life skills".

Breakout fact: A recent Curtin University study titled *What makes for Successful and Unsuccessful Relationships* found 'lack of effective communication' was the most cited reason for the breakdown of a relationship.