

CHAPTER 7

Communication and Sexuality

*We had great sex, but we never learned how to talk about our relationship/talk out our problems. ...
We always turned to a physical solution, and things eventually blew up in our faces.*

Anonymous undergraduate

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OBJECTIVES

1. Review the various relationship/sexual principles of effective communication
2. Give examples of congruent messages
3. Know how technology/texting is used to initiate, cultivate, maintain, and end relationships
4. Discuss sexting in relationships and the legal implications
5. Explain the difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions (give examples)
6. Discuss and explain the various communication theories
7. Explain the difference between privacy, secrecy, and deception. Is honesty always the best policy?
8. Understand the extent of dishonesty among college students
9. Describe how to resolve conflict in relationships
10. Review various gender differences in communication



Source: Maria McDonald

TRUTH OR FICTION?

- T / F** 1. Women are less comfortable talking about sex than men.
- T / F** 2. The more couples depend on texting to communicate, the lower their relationship satisfaction.
- T / F** 3. Disclosing an affair is always the right thing to do.
- T / F** 4. Women are more likely than men to define emotional behaviors as cheating.
- T / F** 5. The greater a couple's communication problem, the lower their relationship quality.

Answers:

1. T 2. T 3. F 4. T 5. T

Psychologist Dr. Robert Birch's profound statement "You can't screw yourself into a good relationship with your partner" emphasizes that sex alone is insufficient to nurture a satisfying relationship. Communication, not sex, is the one factor that distinguishes a mediocre relationship from a great one. Notice that when people are proud of their relationship and want others to know how good it is, they will say, "We talked all night." When their relationship has turned sour, however, they say, "We have nothing to say to each other."

Just as communication, in general, facilitates a very satisfying relationship, sexual intimacy is enhanced by good sexual communication. The following examples illustrate the need for communicating about sexuality:

- Mary is involved in an emotional and sexual relationship with Tom. Cunnilingus is the only way she can experience an orgasm, but she is reluctant to talk to Tom about her need. She has a dilemma: If she tells Tom, she risks his disapproval and his refusal to do what she asks. If she does not tell Tom about her need, she risks growing resentful and feeling dissatisfied in their sexual relationship.
- José has drifted into a flirtatious relationship with a woman in his office. He is emotionally and sexually attracted to her. He knows she feels the same. José is also in love with his partner of 3 years and is committed to her emotionally and sexually. Should he tell Maria about his attraction to the woman at work? Should he disclose that he has dreamed about her? That he has sexual fantasies about her? How open should he be?
- Sherry and her husband, Gary, get into frequent arguments. Their pattern is that after arguing, they cool off by not talking to each other for a few hours. But Gary sometimes approaches Sherry for sex as a way to make up. Sherry prefers to talk about their conflict and resolve it before having sex, but she is afraid that if she rejects Gary's sexual advances, he will become angry again. What should she do?

It was an odd quandary for them. He needed sex in order to feel connected to her, and she needed to feel connected to him in order to enjoy sex.

Lisa Alther, novelist

Resolution of the above dilemmas involves talking about sexual expectations, attraction to others, and the timing of sex after an argument. In this chapter we focus on the details of communicating about sexuality in a relationship. We begin by focusing on basic principles.

7.1 Principles of Relationship/ Sexual Communication

Amy: Sheldon, are we ever going to have an intimate relationship?

Sheldon: Oh, my. That's an uncomfortable topic. Amy, before I met you, I never had any interest in being intimate with anyone.

Amy: And now?

Sheldon: And now what?

Amy: Do you have any interest now?

Sheldon: I have not ruled it out.

Amy: Wow. Talk dirty to me.

The Big Bang Theory (TV series)

Communication involves both information and the process of exchanging information between individuals. The information, or the messages exchanged between individuals, is referred to as the *content*. The fact that the individuals are communicating, and the way in which they do so, is the *process*. Communication is the exchange of accurate and timely information with another person. If the information does not convey the speaker's intentions, the exchange is inadequate/inaccurate. If the information comes too late ("You never told me you loved me"), it can be as worthless as no information at all.

As important as communication is for developing and sustaining fulfilling and enduring relationships, there are few contexts in which we learn the skills of communicating, and talking about sex and sexual issues may be even more difficult—especially for women. In interviews with 95 women age 20–68, Montemurro and colleagues (2015) found that most were not comfortable talking about sex (doing so is "what men do"), and women who did talk about sex feared being judged negatively.

In this chapter, we review some of the principles of communication as they apply to relationships in general and to the sexual relationship specifically.

Communication

Exchange of messages between two or more people

7.1a Initiate Discussion of Important Issues

Effective communication means addressing important issues. The three scenarios described earlier require talking about sexual expectations, attraction to others, and the timing of sex after an argument. Failure to deal with these issues leads to being frustrated sexually, leaving a relationship vulnerable to an affair, and creating a destructive pattern—for example, Gary is reinforcing arguing by having sex afterward, which will likely increase the frequency of arguments.

In regard to her sexual expectations, Mary might say, “Let’s talk about making our sex life even better. I love/enjoy pleasuring you orally, and it looks like you enjoy it too! I also get pleasure from you going down on me. What can I do so this is something that you feel good about doing?”

José, who is drifting into an affair, needs to take responsibility for his behavior of flirting with his office mate and stop it—there is no necessity for disclosure to his wife. Each spouse must prioritize the other to ensure that other people don’t drain off their affections or time. This strategy assumes that the spouses are not in an open relationship in which other partners are normative.

The problem of Gary’s “sex after an argument” response can be solved by the couple deciding not to do so. They should have sex only when they are both feeling intimate, loving, and sexual toward each other, not as a consequence of an argument. Otherwise, they may learn that the condition of having satisfying sex is to be angry at each other. Talking about when to have sex and jointly deciding to avoid doing so just after an argument is a worthy goal.

7.1b Choose Good Timing

The phrase “timing is everything” can be applied to interpersonal communication. In general, it is best to discuss important or difficult issues when partners are alone together in private with no distractions, have ample time to talk, and are rested and sober. Avoid discussing important issues when you or your partner are tired or under unusual stress. If one partner (or both) is upset, it may be best to wait until things have cooled off. If you aren’t sure whether the timing is right, you can ask your partner, “Is this a good time for you to talk?” Likewise, if your partner brings up an issue you’re not ready for, suggest a specific alternative time to have the discussion.

Good timing in communication also means that information should be communicated when the receiver can make an informed response. For example, discussions about sexual issues—such as pregnancy prevention, STI protection, and monogamy—should occur *before* partners engage in sexual activity.

The two words information and communication are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.

Sydney J. Harris, journalist

7.1c Give Congruent Messages

The process of communication involves both verbal and nonverbal messages. **Verbal messages** are the words individuals say to each other. **Nonverbal messages** include facial expressions, gestures, bodily contact, and tone of voice. Kozin (2016) noted that flirting is most suggestive when it is nonverbal: “an inadvertent touch, a surreptitious smile, the floating, touch-and-go eye contact, the other-directed demeanor, and the closely set proxemics.” When verbal and nonverbal messages match each other, they are considered *congruent messages*.

What happens when verbal and nonverbal messages don’t match? For example, suppose Lashanda and Brian are giving feedback about the last time they had sex. Lashanda says to Brian, “It was good.” However, with her sullen facial expression, lack

BVT Lab

Flashcards are available for this chapter at www.BVTLab.com.

Verbal messages

Words individuals say to each other

Nonverbal messages

Type of communication in which facial expressions, gestures, bodily contact, and tone of voice predominate



Regardless of what these lovers say, their nonverbal behavior communicates disapproval and disgust. Source: Chelsea Curry

of eye contact, and hesitant tone of voice, Lashanda's verbal and nonverbal messages are not congruent. When this happens, the other partner typically gives more weight to the nonverbal message. In this scenario, Brian would probably believe the nonverbal message, thinking that Lashanda didn't enjoy their encounter. He might also feel that she was not being honest with him.

Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, comes through loud and clear, even on a first date. Cohen (2016) asked 390 undergraduates to rate their dates' verbal and nonverbal behaviors that signaled that their date was attracted to them. Results revealed differences between females and males. Behaviors that women viewed as signaling attraction included their dates making comments on their physical appearance ("You look nice"), centering the conversation on them

("Tell me about you"), referring to things in common ("We have the same major"), maintaining a lively conversation, discussing the future ("Maybe we could go to that concert"), paying for the meal, extending the date ("Want to take a walk?"), hugging/kissing them goodbye at the end of the date, and texting/calling shortly afterward.

Behaviors that men viewed as signaling that their date was attracted to them included the woman talking about herself—her own life, interests, and hobbies. Men perceived this as the woman letting her guard down and revealing herself. Other first-date behaviors men liked were steering the conversation to the topic of sex ("How do you feel about sex?") and hugging/kissing goodbye at the end of the date. The men did not want the women to initiate contact after the date, but to respond to their texts/calls.

The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said.

Peter Drucker, businessman

Behaviors both genders noted that signaled that their dates were not attracted to them included waving hello and goodbye, talking about past relationships, focusing on differences, and having no subsequent contact after the date.

SELF-ASSESSMENT 7-1:

THE SEXUAL SIGNALING BEHAVIORS INVENTORY



When you think your partner can be persuaded to have sex, even though they have not yet become aware of your desire, what do you usually do? Check all items that apply.

- A. ☐ Ask directly
- B. ☐ Use some code words with which the person is familiar
- C. ☐ Use more eye contact
- D. ☐ Use touching (snuggling, kissing, etc.)
- E. ☐ Change appearance or clothing
- F. ☐ Remove clothing
- G. ☐ Change tone of voice
- H. ☐ Make indirect talk of sex

- I. ___ Do more favors for the other
- J. ___ Set mood atmosphere (music, lighting, etc.)
- K. ___ Share a drink
- L. ___ Tease
- M. ___ Look at sexual material
- N. ___ Play games such as chase or light "roughhousing"
- O. ___ Give compliments ("I love you." "You're nice.")
- P. ___ Use some force
- Q. ___ Use "suggestive" body movements or postures
- R. ___ Allow hands to wander
- S. ___ Lie down
- T. ___ Other (describe _____)

Dr. Clinton Jessor (1978), a sociology professor who was interested in determining how college students communicate to their heterosexual partners when they want coitus (sexual intercourse), developed this scale. He examined the responses of 50 men and 75 women; 90% and 75%, respectively, were coitally experienced. The most frequently reported signals were "used touching (snuggling, kissing, etc.)" and "allowed hands to wander," which were both endorsed by more than 70% of the men and women as indicating a desire for intercourse. The next most frequent item was "asked directly," which was reported by 58% of the women and 56% of the men. Although there was essentially no difference in the reports of men and women who said they asked directly, women were more likely to report using eye contact, changing their appearance or clothing, and changing their tone of voice. The women who used the direct approach (42 of the 75) were no more likely to be rebuffed than those using an indirect approach. Dr. Jessor (1998) suggested that the Sexual Signaling Behaviors Inventory could also be used with gay and lesbian participants.

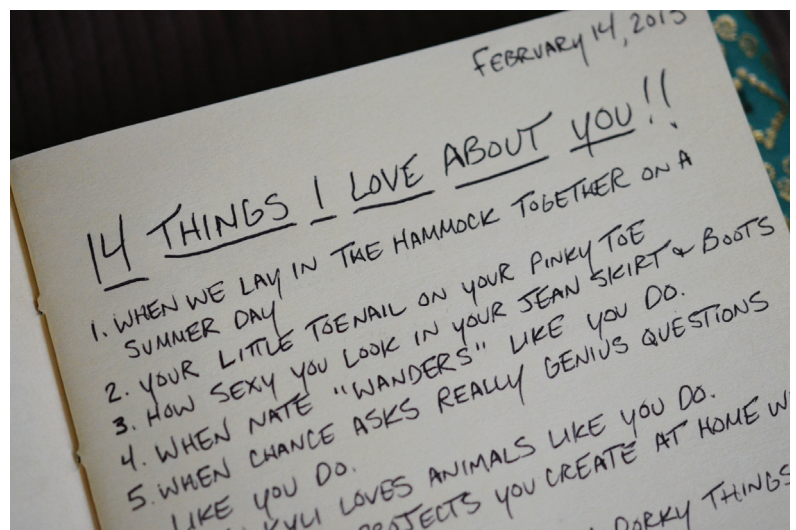
Source: Jessor, C. J. (1978). Male responses to direct verbal sexual initiatives of females. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 14(2), 118–128. Used with permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

7.1d Minimize Criticism; Maximize Compliments

Research on marital interaction has consistently shown that one brutal zinger can erase 20 acts of kindness (Notarius & Markman, 1994). Because intimate partners are capable of hurting each other so deeply, it is important not to criticize your partner.

Conversely, complimenting your partner and making positive remarks can enhance the relationship. Sincere compliments and positive remarks are not only good to hear, they can also create a **self-fulfilling prophecy** effect. A partner who is often told that they are an attentive and affectionate lover is more likely to behave accordingly to make these expectations come true than a partner who receives no feedback or negative feedback.

Gottman and colleagues (1998) studied 130 newlywed couples to examine marital communication patterns that are predictive of marital satisfaction. They found that a high positive-to-negative statement ratio predicted satisfaction among stable couples. In longitudinal studies with more than 2,000 married couples, happy couples, on the average, have five times as many positive interactions and expressions as negative expressions. This five-to-one ratio of positives to negatives is "the magic ratio," according to Gottman (1994, p. 56). He compares it to the pH of soil, the balance between acidity



Making a list is a clear way to express positive feelings toward your partner.
Source: Maria McDonald

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Behaving in such a way to make expectations come true; for example, caustically accusing a partner of infidelity may lead that partner to be unfaithful

and alkalinity that is essential for fertility; likewise, a relationship must be balanced by a great deal more positivity than negativity for love/sexual interest to be nourished.

Gottman (1994) also identified four negative qualities that sabotage attempts at partner communication and are the strongest predictors of divorce: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These qualities are so potentially destructive to a relationship that he calls them “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Criticism involves an attack on the partner’s personality or character rather than a specific behavior. Contempt is behind the intention to insult a partner and may involve psychological abuse. Examples include hostile humor, name calling, and insults. Defensiveness—denying responsibility or making excuses—escalates conflict. The most symptomatic behavior of relationship disaster is stonewalling, or shutting the partner out. The stonewaller just stops interaction, turning into a “stone wall” (p. 94).

Making positive statements is particularly important at the beginning and end of a discussion. In psychology, the term **primacy/recency effect** refers to the human tendency to remember best what occurs first and last in a sequence. After discussing a difficult issue, partners may be more likely to come away with a positive feeling about the interaction if it begins and ends with positive comments. For example, suppose your partner tries a new sexual position with you that you find unpleasant. You might say, “I didn’t enjoy that; please don’t do it again.” But instead, you could say, “I’m glad you want us to try new things, but that position was a bit uncomfortable/painful for me. I’d rather be on top. Being able to tell you what I like and don’t like is one of the things I like most about our relationship.” This might result in continued exploration/enjoyment of the sexual relationship, in contrast to the former statement, which could shut the sex down.

If you’re so upset with your partner that you begin a discussion by blurting out a negative comment, you can still end the conversation on a positive note, such as, “Thank you for listening to my anger and allowing me to vent.” Or, if your partner begins a discussion with a negative remark such as, “Our sex life is so boring, you never want to try anything new,” you can respond positively: “Thanks for telling me about your frustration with our sex life. I need to know when things aren’t working. Let’s talk about what we can do to spice things up.”

Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, author

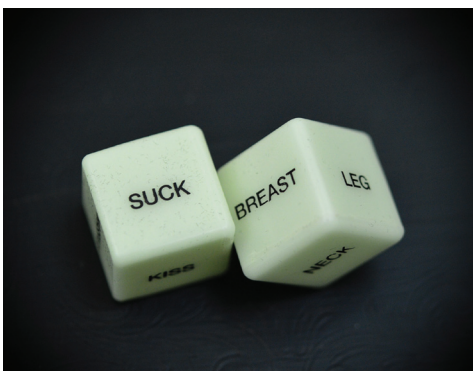
Primacy/recency effect

Tendency of individuals to remember best what occurs first and last in a sequence

7.1e Communicate Feelings

In intimate relationships, it is important to communicate emotions—feelings as well as thoughts. This advice sounds simple, but many people aren’t in touch with their feelings or they confuse them with thoughts. If you listen to yourself and to others, you’ll hear people communicating thoughts that are often labeled as feelings. For example, the statement “I feel that we should be tested for STIs” communicates a thought, not a feeling. Feelings include sadness, fear, anger, joy, excitement, guilt, boredom, anxiety, frustration, and depression. “We should be tested for STIs” is not a feeling. The statement “I am afraid to have sex with you because we haven’t been tested for STIs” is expressing a feeling—fear.

To communicate emotions, you must first recognize and label, or describe, them. Unfortunately, many people learn to hide and repress unpleasant feelings. Before you can communicate your emotions to a partner, you must access your feelings and give yourself permission to feel them and talk about them. Attempts to cover up or minimize unpleasant feelings may be made with the best intentions, but repressing your emotions or stifling your partner’s often serves to prolong the emotional state rather than to resolve it. What are your



Some partners roll the dice to identify what they will try next. Source: Maria McDonald

feelings about your sexual relationship with your partner—joy, excitement, adventurousness, sadness, fear, hopelessness, guilt, or apprehension?

7.1f Tell Your Partner What You Want

In a relationship, it is important for partners to decide what behaviors they want from each other, to tell each other in clear behavioral terms what they want, and to do so in a positive way. Table 7-1 provides examples of how complaints can be reframed into requests.

TABLE 7-1 | Rephrasing Complaints into Positive Requests

Complaints	Requests
I don't like to make love when you haven't showered.	Please take a shower before we make love. I'll guarantee better sex if you shower first.
Don't rub so hard.	Please rub more softly ... like this.
I don't want you to stay up so late at night.	How about coming to bed at 10:00 and letting me know how I can make it worth your while?
Leave me alone; I'm trying to get ready for work!	We can have some long, slow sex after a glass of wine later tonight.
Whenever I ask you to massage me, you end up wanting to have sex with me.	Just give me a massage, please. Tomorrow night I'll give you one as a prelude to fun sex.

One common error people make when communicating is not being specific enough about what they want. When you tell your partner what you want, use specific, behavioral terms; notice that the requests in Table 7-1 are specific.

Women may be less assertive about what they want sexually than men, particularly when they want oral sex. In a study of 237 sexually active women, the researchers observed that if they perceived that their partners would not be open to giving them oral sex, they were less likely to ask them to do so (Satinsky & Jozkowski, 2015).

7.1g Make Statements Instead of Asking Questions

When partners are uncomfortable or unwilling to express their feelings and behavioral desires, they may put their statements in the form of questions. For example, partners who have difficulty expressing what they want may ask the question, "Do you think we should see a sex therapist?" instead of making the statement "I think we might benefit from seeing a sex therapist."

Transforming statements into questions allows partners to mask or hide their true feelings, thoughts, and desires—and thus interferes with the development and maintenance of relationship intimacy. Try to discern which of your partner's and your own questions are really statements that are masking feelings, wants, or both, and rephrase the questions into statements.

7.1h Ask Open-Ended Questions

When you want information from your partner, open-ended questions will often yield more information than closed-ended ones. An **open-ended question** is a broad question designed to elicit a lot of information. In contrast, a **closed-ended question** can be answered in one word. Open-ended questions are useful in finding out your partner's feelings, thoughts, and desires. One way to use open-ended questions in a sexual relationship is to follow the **touch-and-ask rule**, whereby each

Open-ended question

Broad question designed to elicit a great deal of information

Closed-ended question

Type of question that yields little information and can be answered in one word

Touch-and-ask rule

Sexual technique whereby each touch and caress is accompanied by the question, "How does that feel?" and is followed by feedback from the partner

touch and caress is accompanied by the question, “How does that feel?” The partner then gives feedback. By using this rule, a couple can learn a lot about how to please each other. Guiding and moving the partner’s hand or body are also ways of giving feedback. Babin (2013) confirmed that verbal and nonverbal communication during sex were positively related to sexual satisfaction.

Table 7-2 provides examples of open- and closed-ended questions. Both may be valuable.

TABLE 7-2 | Open-Ended and Closed-Ended Questions

Open-Ended Questions	Closed-Ended Questions
What are your thoughts about condom use?	Do you have a condom?
What can I do to please you sexually?	Would you like oral sex?
Tell me your thoughts about having children.	Do you want to have children? How many? What interval?
How do you feel about trying something new?	Do you want to try anal sex? Do you want me to tie you up, blindfold you, and enjoy you orally?
What are your views on abortion?	Would you agree to have an abortion if we got pregnant?

My wife said I don't listen to her—at least I think that's what she said.

Laurence J. Peter, author and educator

7.1i Use Reflective Listening

One of the most important communication skills is the art of **reflective listening**: restating the meaning of what your partner has said to you in a conversation. With this technique, your partner is more likely to feel that you are listening and that you understand their feelings, thoughts, and desires. In practicing reflective listening, it is important to repeat the ideas or thoughts expressed by your partner, as well as the emotions that your partner has conveyed. For example, suppose that after you have made love, your partner says, “Next time, can we spend a little more time on foreplay?” You might respond by reflecting back your partner’s message: “You’re saying that you feel frustrated that we didn’t take more time to be loving and affectionate before having intercourse and that more foreplay is something you definitely want us to include in our lovemaking.”

Using the technique of reflective listening is challenging when one partner blames or criticizes the other. When people are blamed or criticized, they typically respond by withdrawing from the interaction, attacking back through blaming or criticizing the other person, or defending or explaining themselves. Each of these responses may produce further conflict and frustration. Alternatively, instead of withdrawing, attacking back, or defending and explaining, the listener can simply reflect back what the partner has said. At some point in the discussion, the criticized partner should express their own thoughts, feelings, and views. However, it is best to first acknowledge the other person’s feelings and thoughts through reflective listening. Table 7-3 presents an example of a critical or accusatory remark, followed by four types of possible responses. Compare the reflective listening response with the other three.

Reflective listening

Communication technique in which one person restates the meaning of what their partner has said in a conversation

“I” statements

Statements that focus on the feelings and thoughts of the communicator without making a judgment on what the other person says or does

7.1j Use “I” Statements

“I” statements focus on the feelings and thoughts of the communicator without making a judgment on others. Because “I” statements are a clear and nonthreatening way of expressing what you want and how you feel, they are likely to result in a positive change in the listener’s behavior.

TABLE 7-3 | Four Responses to a Critical or Accusatory Remark

Critical or Accusatory Remark
"You told me you had only a couple of sexual partners before me. You lied."
Four Possible Responses
1. <i>Withdraw from the interaction:</i> "I can't handle this. I'm out of here."
2. <i>Attack back:</i> "Well, you didn't tell me you had herpes. That's lying, too."
3. <i>Defend or explain:</i> "I was afraid you would break up with me if I told you the real reason. ... I didn't want to hurt you or us."
4. <i>Reflective listening:</i> "You are angry at me for telling you I had fewer previous sexual partners than I really did. You wish that I had been honest with you. I'm sorry."

"You" statements

In communication theory, those statements that blame or criticize the listener and often result in increasing negative feelings and behavior in the relationship

In contrast, **"you" statements** blame or criticize the listener and often result in increasing negative feelings and behavior in the relationship. For example, suppose you are angry with your partner for watching porn. Rather than saying, "You are very deceitful watching porn. ... I checked your history on the computer, and you've been indulging yourself since we have been together" (a "you" statement), you might say, "It upsets me that you watch porn when I am not here. I much prefer that we watch porn together." The latter focuses on your feelings and what you would like to happen.



Waiting for a partner to communicate is difficult, but there are productive ways to react to another's silence. Source: Maria McDonald

PERSONAL DECISIONS 7.1



What to Do When Your Partner Will Not Communicate

One of the most frustrating experiences in relationships occurs when one partner wants and tries to communicate, but the other partner will not. Of course, partners always communicate—even not communicating is a way of communicating. What if your partner will not respond to something you say? You might try the following (Duncan & Rock, 1993):

1. *Change your strategy.* Rather than trying to coax your partner into talking, become less available for conversation and stop trying to initiate or maintain discussion. Keep it short if a discussion does start. This strategy removes the pressure on the partner to talk and shifts the power in the relationship.
2. *Interpret silence in a positive way.* For example, "We are so close that we don't always have to be talking" or "I feel good when you're quiet because I know that it means everything is all right between us." This negates any power your partner might be expressing through silence.
3. *Focus less on the relationship and more on satisfying yourself.* When you do things for yourself, you need less from others in the way of attention and assurance.

BVT Lab

Improve your test scores.
Practice quizzes are
available at
www.BVTLab.com.

7.1k Keep the Process Going

In the introduction to this chapter, we noted that communication involves both content (the words that are said) and process (the continued interaction/discussion). It is important to keep the process going and not allow the content to shut it down. For example, Angela says to Andy, “I don’t trust you.” Instead of Andy blurting, “I don’t care what you think” while he leaves the room, a more helpful response might be, “I appreciate your telling me your feelings; tell me why you feel that way.” In this way, the conversation continues, and the couple can move toward a resolution. Otherwise, the discussion stops, and nothing is resolved.

Cultural Diversity

The culture in which a person is reared will influence the meaning of various words. An American woman was dating a man from Iceland. When she asked him, “Would you like to go out to dinner?” he responded, “Yes, maybe.” She felt confused by this response and was uncertain whether he wanted to eat out. It was not until she visited his home in Iceland and asked his mother, “Would you like me to set the table?”—and his mother replied, “Yes, maybe”—that she discovered that “Yes, maybe” means “Yes, definitely.”



7.1l Take Responsibility for Being Understood

Partners often blame each other for not understanding what is said. “Are you deaf? Didn’t you hear what I said? Can’t you understand anything?” are phrases that blame the partner. The result is that the partner feels bad, will become emotionally distant, and will be less interested in subsequent communication. To avoid these negative feelings, which are likely to increase the distance between partners, each partner should take full responsibility for making themselves heard: “I’m sorry; I’m not making myself clear. What I am trying to say is that I think we should stop talking about this issue and let it go.” The partner may not like what is being said but doesn’t feel belittled for not understanding.

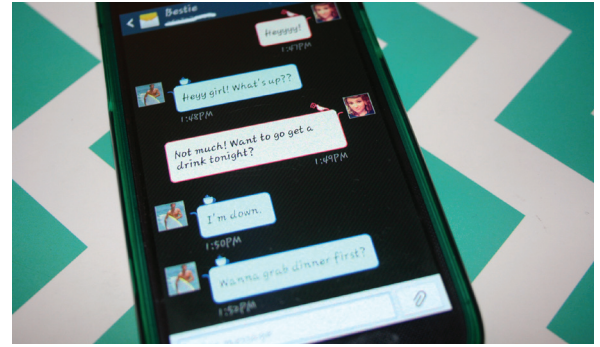
7.1m Avoid Rehashing/Stay Focused

Partners sometimes get off the subject and turn a discussion into a session of criticizing their partner. For example, if the topic is “Where is our relationship going?” the conversation can easily degenerate into accusations of “You never loved me,” and “Let’s break up.” Alternatively, the partners can stay focused on what they do and don’t want from their relationship.

Applying the communication principles presented in this chapter to everyday interactions can enhance both individual and relationship well-being and increase your sexual satisfaction with your partner. The principles and techniques are fairly simple but not necessarily easy to apply. For effective application, you must first abandon old patterns of communication and deliberately replace them with the new. Most couples report that the effort is worthwhile.

7.2 Technology, Communication, and Relationships

Text messages have become a primary means for flirting and for the initiation, escalation, and maintenance of romantic relationships in young adults (Gibbs, 2012; Bergdall et al., 2012).



Text messaging has become a primary means of communication.
Source: Chelsea Curry



National & International DATA

Based on a survey of 4,700 respondents in the United States and seven other countries (China, U.K., India, South Korea, South Africa,

Indonesia, and Brazil), 9 in 10 people carry a cell phone (1 in 4 check it every 30 minutes; 1 in 5 check it every 10 minutes) (Gibbs, 2012).

7.2a Texting and Interpersonal Communication

People have entire relationships via text messages now.

Danielle Steel, novelist

Personal, portable, wirelessly networked technology in the form of iPhones, Androids, iPads, and so on have become commonplace in the lives of individuals as a way of staying connected with friends and partners (Reich et al., 2012). According to one researcher, today's youth are being socialized in a hyperdigital age in which traditional modes of communication will be replaced by gadgets, and texting will become the primary mode of communication (Bauerlein, 2010). The most common reasons for texting are to express affection (75%), discuss serious issues (25%), and apologize (12%). There are no significant differences in use by gender, ethnicity, or religion (Coyne et al., 2011).

A downside of this technological avalanche is **nomophobia**, in which the individual is dependent on virtual environments to the point of having a social phobia (King et al., 2013) and finds personal interaction difficult. In addition, texting in the presence of your partner interrupts your face-to-face communication and encourages the intrusion of your work/job or other texting respondent into the emotional intimacy of your love relationship. "Even when we are alone, my partner is texting," said one undergraduate. When texting becomes *sexting*, with sexual photos, the behavior can have legal consequences (see *Technology and Sexuality* 7–1).

Nomophobia

Dependence on virtual reality environments to the point that one has a social phobia



Technology and Sexuality 7-1: Sexting

How much are undergraduates involved in sexting? Parker and colleagues (2011) used a 25-item online survey to question 483 undergraduates about their use of technology to send sexual messages, photos, and videos to a romantic partner. Findings included the following:

1. *Use of technology:* Almost two thirds (64%) of the respondents reported sending a sexual text message, 42.9% a sexual photo, and 12.7% a sex video to a romantic partner.
2. *Frequency of use:* The frequency of sending sexual content varied from daily (4%) to less than once a month (26%).
3. *Gender differences:* There were no gender differences in sexting. However, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to have been the first to initiate sending sexual content. In addition, males were more likely to perceive sexting as having a positive effect on the couple's relationship.
4. *Racial differences:* Nonwhites, compared to whites, were more likely to report ever having used technology to send sexual content to a romantic partner. Burke Winkleman et al. (2014) found a similar racial difference.
5. *Class in school:* When compared to first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors were more likely to report ever having used technology to send sexual content to a romantic partner. In effect, the older the student, the more likely the student had used technology to send sexual content.
6. *Type of technology:* Text messaging was the technology used most frequently to send sexual content to a current or frequent partner.

Most sexting research has been conducted on unmarried individuals. In regard to sexting among spouses, McDaniel and Drouin (2015) surveyed 180 wives and 175 husbands. They found that 29% reported texting sexy/intimate talk, and 12% reported sending sexually explicit photos/videos.

Research has shown that women who send sex photos to their male partners are pressured to do so. This finding has been questioned by Lee and Crofts (2015), who provided data that as few as 10% of females reported pressure from a male as the primary reason for sending sex photos, finding that fun and flirtatiousness were the more common reasons. However, Lippman and Campbell (2014), among other researchers, noted that females are both pressured to send sex photos and labeled as sluts for doing so. A study by Y. Usigan (2011) also found that teen girls are pressured and shamed by peers for sexting.

7.2b When Social Media Sites Become a Relationship Problem

Norton and Baptist (2012) identified how social networking sites (such as Facebook, with over a billion users and 140 billion friendship connections) are problematic for couples—the sites are intrusive (one partner surfs while the other is talking), encourage compulsive use (partner texts during mealtimes and on vacation), and can facilitate infidelity (flirting/cheating online). Norton and Baptist studied how 205 married individuals mitigated the impact of technology on their relationship. Three strategies included openness (each spouse knew the passwords and online friends and had access to each other's online social networking accounts, email, etc.), fidelity (flirting and online relationships were off limits), and appropriate people (knowing the friends of the partner, and no former partners allowed).

7.3 Communication Theory

Because communication involves interaction in social contexts, we examine various theoretical frameworks for relationship communication. Models of communication come from the fields of mathematics, psychology, and sociology. Three that seem especially relevant to communication between partners are identity formation theory, social learning theory, and social exchange theory.

If you don't like what is being said, change the conversation.

Don Draper, *Mad Men* (TV series)

7.3a Identity Formation Theory

One reason that interpersonal communication is so important, according to such theorists as George Herbert Mead and Erik Erikson, is that our self-identity develops largely as a result of social interaction. We learn about ourselves from the responses of others—their communications give us cues about how important, capable, or inadequate we are. Cooley (1964) coined the term **looking-glass self** to describe the idea that the image people have of themselves is a reflection of what other people tell them about themselves. However, reflections from others that are inconsistent or contradictory with your self-image may cause tension or anxiety. Individuals may see themselves differently from the way others perceive them. For example, when a male hooks up nightly with a new partner, he may see himself as a stud that women love, but others may see him as a lonely guy who is incapable of intimacy.

7.3b Social Learning Theory

Verbal behavior, positive or negative, is decreased or increased depending on whether it is reinforced or punished. For example, if a person expresses an opinion (“I think that same-sex marriage should be legalized throughout the United States”) and their partner reinforces this view with “I agree,” the person is likely to continue talking about gay rights. On the other hand, the partner might say, “How can you say that? Marriage is for women and men who can reproduce/have children.” That response is likely to punish expressing an opinion on same-sex marriage, so that the person may be more likely to change the subject.

Verbal statements may be discriminative or serve as cues for other types of responses. For example, a partner may say, “I am going upstairs to take a shower and will be ready for a glass of wine” (translation: “I am getting cleaned up for sexual intimacy”). A discriminative stimulus may also be used to cue that a behavior will not lead to reinforcement, as when the partner replies, “I am going to go to bed. See you tomorrow.”

7.3c Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theorists combine behavioral psychology and economic theory. Exchange theorists suggest that the interaction between partners can be described as a ratio of rewards to costs. For example, two strangers who meet with the possibility of hooking up will continue to interact only if each has a high ratio of rewards to cost.

Rewards are positive outcomes of the interaction—each smiles at the other, says nice things, touches the other gently and nondemandingly, and so on. *Costs* refer to negative outcomes, such as receiving criticism or feeling regret, which make the interaction painful. As long as the rewards outweigh the costs and there is a profit for the interaction, the relationship will continue. When the costs are higher than the rewards and there is a loss for the interaction, the relationship will stop. In long-term relationships, a person may forgo immediate rewards in anticipation of long-term gain, especially if

Looking-glass self
Idea that the image people have of themselves is a reflection of what other people tell them they are

there is reciprocity in the exchanges between the partners. Although this idea doesn't sound romantic, sociological theorists observe that even love relationships are established and continued on the basis of reciprocity—that is, exchanged benefits and costs. Social exchange theories have been applied to the study of relationships and sexuality, so that people who hook up can be understood as exchanging reinforcers throughout the evening as they move toward one apartment or the other—the partners smile at each other, they drink, they flirt, they touch each other, and so on. If either partner stops reinforcing, the interaction will stop, and no hooking up will occur.



The Law and Sexting

The transmission of sexual content—either words, photos, or video—from one person to another is common across all types of romantic relationships (committed, casually sexual, and cheating), with text messaging being the primary medium used to send sex pictures and videos (Drouin et al., 2013). Sexting may be positive, as a relationship enhancer, or negative—perhaps as a ticket to becoming a felon if the photos are of underage individuals.

In a survey of 1,652 undergraduates, 65% reported having sent sexually suggestive texts or photos to a current or potential partner, and 69% had received them. Approximately 31% shared these private communications with a third party. Contrary to

Lee and Crofts's data (2015), females in this study were significantly more likely to feel pressured to send sex texts and photos than males (Burke-Winkleman et al., 2014).

While most undergraduates are not at risk as long as the parties are age 18 or older, sending erotic photos of individuals younger than age 18 can be criminal. Many countries consider sexting to be child pornography, and laws related to child pornography have been applied in some cases. In the United States, six high-school students in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, were charged with child pornography after three teenage girls allegedly took nude or semi-nude photos of themselves and shared them with male classmates via their cell phones. While there is disagreement whether sexting by teenagers in romantic relationships constitutes child pornography, caution is warranted (Zhang, 2010; Jaishankar, 2009). Sexuality educators might do well to alert students to the catastrophic legal consequences of sexting (Burke et al., 2014). Ricketts et al. (2015) investigated the sexting behaviors of adolescents under the age of 18 and found that deviant peer associations and Internet-related problems such as online addiction were associated with sexting by juveniles. Some students may view sending sexual images on Snapchat® as safer because the image disappears quickly, before it can be saved or sent to someone, but many third-party apps enable saving and sharing, so it's far from foolproof (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2014).

7.4 Honesty and Dishonesty in Interpersonal Communication

Deception, dishonesty, cheating, lying, and infidelity—whatever the label—have become major sources of emotional distress and sexual dissatisfaction in relationships. Being cheated on is not uncommon among undergraduates. Of 7,511 undergraduate females, 58% reported that they had been involved with a partner who cheated on them. Of 2,338 males, 52% reported that they had been cheated on. Of those who reported having cheated on a partner, 30% are female and 29% are male (Hall & Knox, 2016). Definitions of cheating vary, with sexual behavior, such as oral sex, more likely to be identified as cheating than emotional behavior, such as being in love with someone else. Women are more likely than men to define emotional behaviors as cheating (Eiseman & Peterson, 2014).

Dishonesty and deception take various forms. In addition to telling an outright lie, people may pretend, exaggerate, or conceal the truth. They may put up a good front, be two-faced, or tell a partial truth. People also engage in self-deception when they deny or fail to acknowledge their own thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, priorities, goals, and desires.

There are no degrees of honesty.

Amish proverb

7.4a Privacy Versus Secrecy and Deception

In virtually every relationship, partners avoid sharing some details about themselves or their past. Sometimes partners don't share their feelings and concerns with each other. However, it is worthwhile to distinguish when withholding information about ourselves is an act of privacy and when it is an act of secrecy or deception. When we withhold private information, we are creating or responding to boundaries between ourselves and other people. There may be no harm done in maintaining some aspects of ourselves as private, not to be disclosed to others. Indeed, it is healthy to have and maintain boundaries between the self and others. However, the more intimate the relationship, the greater your desire is to share your most personal and private self with your partner—and the greater the emotional consequences of not sharing.

College students also keep secrets from their partners. In a study of 431 undergraduates, Easterling et al. (2012) found the following:

1. *Most kept secrets.* Over 60% of respondents reported having kept a secret from a romantic partner, and over one quarter of respondents reported that they are currently doing so.
2. *Females kept more secrets.* Sensitivity to the partner's reaction, desire to avoid hurting the partner, and desire to avoid damaging the relationship may be the primary reasons females were more likely than males to keep a secret from a romantic partner.
3. *Spouses kept more secrets.* Spouses have a great deal to lose if there is an indiscretion or if one partner does something the other will disapprove of, such as spending too much money. Partners who are dating or "seeing each other" have less to lose and are less likely to keep secrets.
4. *Black people kept more secrets.* In the United States, black people are a minority who are still victimized by the white majority. One way to avoid such victimization is to keep your thoughts to yourself, keeping them secret for the purpose of self-preservation. This practice may generalize to romantic relationships.
5. *Homosexuals kept more secrets.* In response to a similar history of victimization, many homosexuals sought security in silence. Indeed, the phrase "in the closet" means keeping a secret.

Respondents were asked why they kept a personal secret from a romantic partner. "To avoid hurting the partner" was the top reason reported by 38.9% of the respondents. "It would alter our relationship," and "I feel so ashamed for what I did," were reported by 17.7% and 10.7% of the respondents, respectively.

7.4b Extent of Dishonesty Among College Students

Lying in relationships among college students is not uncommon. In one study, 77 college students kept diaries of their daily social interactions and reported telling two lies a day (DePaulo et al., 1996). Participants said they did not regard their lies as serious and did not plan them or worry about being caught. In another study, 137 students reported 21 lies they had told to a current or past partner. The most frequently told lie, reported by 31% of the respondents, was “the number of previous sex partners” (Knox et al., 1993). College students and community members reported the most serious lies they ever told were to their closest relationship partners (DePaulo et al., 2004). Their motivations were to get something they wanted, do something to which they felt entitled, avoid punishment or confrontation, keep up appearances, protect others, or avoid hurting others.

Walters and Burger (2013) studied individuals who defined themselves as having cheated on a romantic partner and who informed the partner about it. While some felt guilty, others wanted to come clean. Still others saw the infidelity as a sign that the relationship was not what it should be or considered it as a way to let the partner know that they wanted a polyamorous relationship. A significant portion of the respondents also felt that, out of respect for the partner and their relationship, they needed to disclose. Most disclosures were done in person (38%) or over the phone (38%). Other means of disclosure included being informed by a third party (12%), via email (6%), and through text messaging (6%). The following is an example of an interview with an undergraduate talking about disclosing to her partner:

I told him, you know, “You weren’t there for me. You haven’t been a boyfriend to me the last few months. I don’t know what you expect from me and everything.” He was mad, and I expected him to be. But I mean [pause] he kinda understood. He didn’t really say much, so there really wasn’t much said after [the disclosure]. But the next day he was talking to me again and everything, and he was like, “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get past it.” But, we didn’t. (Walters & Burger, 2013, p. 36)

Often the difference between a successful marriage and a mediocre one consists of leaving about three or four things a day unsaid.

Harlan Miller, author

PERSONAL DECISIONS 7.2



Is Honesty Always the Best Policy?

Good communication often implies open communication, and there is a social script claiming that total honesty with your partner is always best. As evidence, there is an adage about marriage, “The secret of a good marriage is: no secrets.” In reality, how much honesty is good for a marriage/relationship? Is honesty always the best policy?

Some individuals believe that relationships can be functional only when a certain amount of illusion is maintained. Not to be told that you are overweight or that you aren’t the best of lovers allows you to maintain the illusion that your partner never thinks of your weight (particularly when you eat a second bag of potato chips) or your sexual inadequacy. You are happier, and your relationship is not hampered by your partner’s honesty.

Complete, or “radical” honesty may carry negative consequences. Suppose you tell your partner about all of your previous partners or sexual relationships because you want an open and honest relationship. Later, during times of anger, your partner brings up this information in the future. Was your honesty worth the consequences?

Disclosing an extramarital affair requires special consideration—spouses might carefully consider the consequences before disclosing. While there are exceptions, in general, disclosure might result in a divorce, and the lives of any affected children might be changed forever. Some couples, however, may find that the disclosure of an affair by one partner forces them to examine problems in their relationship, seek marriage therapy, or both. In such cases, disclosure may ultimately result in bringing the couple closer together in an emotional sense. Caughlin and Bassinger (2015) question whether “completely open and honest communication is really what we want,” suggesting that the value of openness should be “balanced against other values, such as politeness, respectfulness, and discretion” (p. f2).

Most individuals are careful about what they say to each other and deliberately withhold information, in some cases for fear of negative outcomes. Some information, however, should not be withheld from the partner, including previous marriages and children, a sexual orientation different from what the partner expects, alcohol or other drug addiction, a sexually transmitted infection (such as HIV or genital herpes) or possible exposure, and any known physical limitations (such as sterility). Disclosures of this nature include anything that would have a significant impact on the partner or the relationship.

Some individuals wait until after the marriage to disclose a secret. One example is a cross-dresser who, fearing his wife’s disapproval, did not disclose his proclivity until years after the marriage. Indeed, he never disclosed; instead, his wife found his bra and panties and confronted him. Although she was ultimately able to accept his desire to cross-dress (and they would shop together), his lack of disclosure was a definite risk. In another case of a cross-dresser who also had not disclosed the practice, he later found that his wife could not overlook his secret. She found out because he had forgotten to remove his earrings one day after he had been cross-dressing. Although they had been married 16 years, had four children, and she viewed him as a good provider, good father, and faithful husband, she regarded his deception across the years as unforgivable.

7.5 Resolving Conflict in Relationships

Being able to resolve conflict is an essential skill for relationship survival, maintenance, and satisfaction. More than half (56%) of the 343 university students surveyed reported having a very troublesome relationship within the past 5 years. Of those who had a troubled relationship, most (69%) reported talking to the partner in an attempt to resolve the problem, 19% avoided discussing the problem, and 18% avoided the partner (Levitt et al., 1996).

I'm not upset that you lied to me; I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher

Howard Markman is head of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. He and his colleagues have been studying 150 couples at yearly intervals (beginning before marriage) to determine the factors most responsible for marital success. They have found that communication skills that reflect the ability to handle conflict and disagreement are the single biggest predictor of marital success over time (Markman et al., 1994):

Remember: It's not how much you love one another, how good your sex life is, or what problems you have with money that best predicts the future quality of your marriage. ... The key is for you to develop constructive tactics and ground rules for handling the conflicts and disagreements that are inevitable in any significant relationship. (p. 6)

There is also merit in developing and using conflict negotiation skills before problems develop. Not only are individuals more willing to work on issues when things are going well, but they also have not developed negative patterns of response that are difficult to change. In the following sections, we review principles and techniques that are helpful in resolving interpersonal conflict.

BVT Lab

Visit www.BVTLab.com to explore the student resources available for this chapter.

7.5a Approach Communication from a Place of Respect and Negotiation

Partners who care about each other and their relationship can best achieve their relationship goals by approaching communication on a particular issue or topic from a place of respect and negotiation. Each partner must regard the other as an equal and acknowledge that their perspectives and views deserve respect. Neither partner is to denigrate the other or dictate an outcome. Rather, the goal of a discussion is for each to have a positive feeling about the outcome rather than to have their position accepted. As one spouse said, “It is better for us to be right with each other than to be right in getting our own way.” This context of respect and negotiation implies that denigrating the partner or being emotionally abusive are both counter to productive discussion and conflict resolution.

7.5b Address Recurring Issues

Some couples are uncomfortable confronting each other to talk about issues that plague them. They fear that such confrontation will further weaken their relationship. Pam is jealous that Mark spends more time with other people at parties than with her. “When we go someplace together,” she blurts out, “he drops me and starts talking with someone else.” Her jealousy is spreading to other areas of their relationship: “When we’re walking down the street and he turns his head to look at another woman, I get furious.” If Pam and Mark don’t discuss her feelings about Mark’s behavior, their relationship may deteriorate as a result of a negative response cycle: He looks at another woman, and she gets angry. Then he gets angry at her anger and finds that he is even more attracted to other women. She gets angrier because he escalates his attention to other women, and so on.

To bring the matter up, Pam might say, “I feel jealous when you spend more time with other women at parties than with me. I need some help in dealing with these feelings.” By expressing her concern in this way, she has identified the problem from her perspective and asked for her partner’s cooperation in handling it. (She did not attack; instead, she invited her partner’s help in dealing with an issue.)

7.5c Focus on What You Want (Rather Than What You Don’t Want)

Dealing with conflict is more likely to result in resolution if both partners focus on what they want rather than what they don’t want. For example, rather than tell Mark she doesn’t want him to spend so much time with other women at parties, Pam might tell him that she wants him to spend more time with her at parties. “I’d feel better if we go together and stay together,” she said, “We don’t need to be joined at the hip, and we will certainly want to talk with others; the bulk of our time there, however, should be spent with each other.”

7.5d Find Out Your Partner’s Point of View

We often assume that we know what our partner thinks and why they do things. Sometimes we are wrong. Rather than assume how they think and feel about a particular issue, we might ask them open-ended questions in an effort to get them to tell us thoughts and feelings about a particular situation. Pam’s words to Mark might be, “What is it like for you when we go to parties? How do you feel about my jealousy?”

After your partner has shared their thoughts about an issue with you, it is important for you to summarize their perspective in a nonjudgmental way. After Mark has told Pam how he feels about their being at parties together, she can summarize his perspective by

saying, “You feel that I cling to you more than I should, and you would like me to let you wander around without feeling like you’re making me angry.” (She may not agree with his view, but she knows exactly what it is—and Mark knows that she knows.)

7.5e Generate Win-Win Solutions to the Conflict

A **win-win solution** is one in which both people involved in a conflict feel satisfied with the agreement or resolution to the conflict. It is imperative to look for win-win solutions to conflicts. Solutions in which one person wins and the other person loses involve one person not getting their needs met. As a result, the person who loses may develop feelings of resentment, anger, hurt, and hostility toward the winner and may even look for ways to get even. In this way, the winner is also a loser. In intimate relationships, one winner really means two losers.

Generating win-win solutions to interpersonal conflicts often requires the technique of **brainstorming**, which involves suggesting as many alternatives as possible without evaluating them. Brainstorming is crucial to conflict resolution because it shifts the partners’ focus from criticizing each other’s perspective to working together to develop alternative solutions. Any solution may be acceptable as long as it is one of mutual agreement.

When men cry, women are caring/nurturing and ask, “How can I help?” When women cry, men say, “I’m going to have a beer. Let me know when you snap out of it.”

Jay Leno, *Tonight Show*

7.5f Evaluate and Select a Solution

After a number of solutions are generated, each solution should be evaluated, and the best one should be selected. In evaluating solutions to conflicts, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Does the solution satisfy both individuals? Is it a win-win solution?
- Is the solution specific? Does the solution specify exactly who is to do what, how, and when?
- Is the solution realistic? Can both parties realistically follow through with what they have agreed upon?
- Does the solution prevent the problem from recurring?
- Does the solution specify what is to happen if the problem recurs?

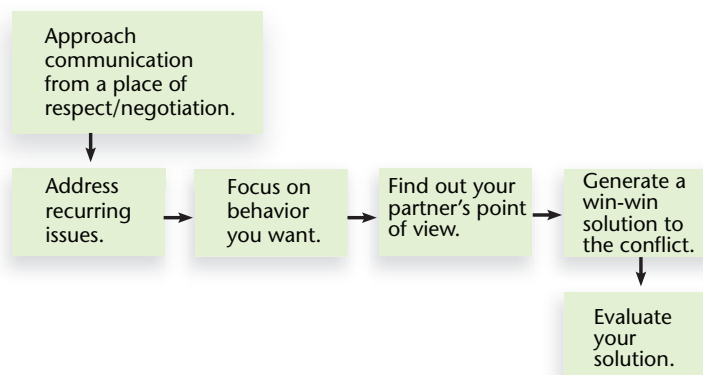
Win-win solution

Outcome of an interpersonal conflict whereby both people feel satisfied with the agreement or resolution

Brainstorming

Problem-solving strategy of suggesting as many alternatives as possible without evaluating them

FIGURE 7-1 || Steps in Resolving Conflict



Greeff and de Bruyne (2000) studied several styles of conflict and noted that the *collaborating style* was associated with the highest level of marital and spousal

satisfaction. Each partner saying how they felt about a situation and cooperating to find a win-win solution characterized the collaborating style. Styles that were not helpful were the *competing style* (each partner tried to force their answer on the other—a win-lose approach) and the *avoiding style* (the partners would simply avoid addressing the issue and hope that it would go away). Depressed spouses who did not have the energy to engage their partners used this pattern of avoidance most frequently.

7.6 Gender Differences in Communication

Females begin to excel in communication skills early. Haapsamo and colleagues (2013) found that females at age 8 months–36 months developed communication skills faster than males. Sociolinguistic scholar and popular author Deborah Tannen (1990) stated, “Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication” (p. 42). Her research shows that men and women are socialized in different same-sex cultures, and when they talk to the other sex, they are talking to a member of another culture. Tannen also found that men and women differ in public and private speaking. She explained the differences using the terms *report talk* and *rapport talk*. Men generally approach communication, even in private situations, like public speaking or giving a report. They see talk as a way to convey information. In contrast, women generally engage in rapport talk, creating interaction and establishing connections. When there are problems in communicating with a partner, women are the first to notice. Pfeifer and colleagues (2013) studied 213 married couples in Taiwan and found that women were significantly more likely than men to report that communication was a problem. Such a communication problem means a drop in marital quality (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013).

In general, to men, communication emphasizes what is informative and competitive; to women, communication is more about emotion and interaction. To men, conversations are negotiations in which they try to “achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and to protect themselves from others’ attempts to put them down and push them around” (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013, p. 25). However, to women, conversations are negotiations for closeness in which they try “to seek and give confirmations and support, and to reach consensus” (p. 25). A woman’s goal is to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation.

Greater use of social network sites by women emphasizes their goal to connect in regard to relationships. Based on a survey of 2,021 individuals ages 12 and over conducted by Arbitron and Edison Research, 27% of the respondents reported using social networking sites/services “several times a day” (Carey & Trap, 2013). Kimbrough and colleagues (2013) confirmed that women use social networking sites more frequently than men.

A team of researchers reviewed the literature on intimacy in communication and observed that men approach a problem in the relationship cognitively, whereas women approach it emotionally (Derlega et al., 1993). A husband might react to a seriously ill child by putting pressure on the wife to be mature (stop crying) about the situation and by encouraging stoicism (asking her not to worry). Women, on the other hand, tend to want their husbands to be more emotional (wanting him to cry to show that he really cares that their child is ill).

Men are also more likely to suppress their emotional expression to their wives. Velotti et al. (2016) studied emotional suppression by both husbands and wives in 229 newlywed couples at 5 months and 2 years after marriage. They found that husbands’ habitual use of suppression was the most consistent predictor of lower marital quality over time.

As noted above, rather than avoidance, suppression, or competitiveness, the “female” style of communication—acknowledging other views, seeking consensus, and interaction—is associated with the best outcome for optimal communication between partners.

Chapter Summary

THIS CHAPTER focused on the value of good communication for intimacy, as well as for relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Principles of Relationship/Sexual Communication

PRINCIPLES include initiating discussions about important issues, giving congruent messages, minimizing negative and maximizing positive remarks, expressing feelings, practicing reflective listening, and using “I” messages.

Technology, Communication, and Relationships

TEXT MESSAGES have become a primary means for flirting and for the initiation, escalation, and maintenance of romantic relationships in young adults. Indeed, technology can facilitate communication in relationships, but it can also lead to conflict. Social networks are intrusive and can easily lead to compulsive use and infidelity.

Communication Theory

THEORIES, including identity formation (communication skills are learned through interaction with others), social learning (verbal statements are a consequence of reinforcers), and social exchange (people continue to interact or don’t in reference to a rewards-to-costs ratio), may be used to help understand communication between partners.

Honesty and Dishonesty in Interpersonal Communication

HONEST COMMUNICATION is associated with trust and intimacy. Despite the importance of honesty in relationships, deception occurs frequently in interpersonal relationships.

Lying is not uncommon in college student relationships. Partners sometimes lie to each other about previous sexual relationships, how they feel about each other, and how they experience each other sexually.

Resolving Conflict in Relationships

HAVING A PLAN to communicate about conflicts is essential. Such a plan includes approaching a discussion from the point of view of respect for the partner and a willingness to negotiate an outcome rather than dictate a solution, addressing recurring issues rather than suppressing them, focusing on what you want rather than what you don’t want, finding out your partner’s point of view, generating win-win solutions to conflict, and evaluating and selecting the solution.

Gender Differences in Communication

SOCIOLINGUIST AND AUTHOR DEBORAH TANNEN observed that men and women are socialized in different same-sex cultures, and when they talk to the other sex, they are talking to a member of another culture. Men tend to approach communication, even in private situations, like public speaking or giving a report. They see talk as a way to convey information. In contrast, women tend to engage in rapport talk, using talk to interact and establish connections.

Women engage in greater use of social network sites such as Facebook than men do. They can also tend to approach an issue more emotionally rather than cognitively. Women generally want men to get in touch with their feelings, whereas men tend to want women to be more direct and decisive. Greater use of social network sites by women emphasizes their goal to connect in regard to relationships.

Web Links

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

<http://aamft.org>

The Gottman Institute

<http://www.gottman.com/>

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Additional study resources are available at www.BVTLab.com

