

# **The Civility Challenge: How to Improve Communication and Problem-Solving in Your Marriage**

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One of the most important things you can do to strengthen your marriage is to set the stage for effective communication and problem-solving. Common courtesy and civility go a long way toward creating a respectful, trustworthy environment for communication.

Think about how annoying and frustrating it is to be out in public and be subjected to the rude and discourteous behavior of others. Incivility in modern age life is increasingly more concerning. We all notice the rude and disrespectful behavior of others. We squirm while hearing the loud conversations of others on their cell phones, grow frustrated when others interrupt us, wince at others' offensive language, notice with dismay the absence of "please and thank you," and defend against the invasion of our personal space.

Most of us are guilty of some of these behaviors from time to time, yet we consider them rude and disrespectful in others. That is especially true when these behaviors occur in your most cherished relationship. All behavior is communication. By the time you begin a conversation with your spouse, you have been communicating all along. Your conduct may tell them you are not interested in their feelings or opinions before you even begin the conversation.

To problem-solve, you must reach a consensus and have buy-in from all parties. When you don't feel important, respected, or heard, you may start a conversation with complaints, ridicule, and shaming. Those communication behaviors set the stage for hostility and communication failure instead of problem-solving. When couples are conflicted over

relationship needs, it becomes challenging to neutralize or recover from adverse events and generate positive feelings. Destructive communication patterns emerge as arguing escalates to anger and verbal violence, or one partner repeatedly tries to engage while the other avoids engagement and conflict. Sometimes the predominant tone of communication is so consistently negative that couples need to move far enough back in their efforts and engage in simply being "nice" to each other.

Civility and common courtesy toward one's partner can assist in re-establishing a neutral emotional tone and create an environment conducive to honest communication. Basic communication skills such as using "I" messages, active listening, and clarifying questions can change the tone of conversations, reduce defensiveness, and improve the ability to "hear" what the other person is saying. Common courtesy also involves apologizing for your part in a misunderstanding or a conflict and respecting your partner's time by not being late.

Treating your spouse respectfully and kindly creates a foundation of trust and understanding conducive to joint problem-solving. Here are some ways that practicing common courtesy and civility can benefit your marriage:

It demonstrates respect. Good communication requires mutual respect between partners. Respectful use of words, body language, and attentive listening shows that you value and appreciate their perspective. Even in conflict or disagreement, remaining civil and courteous sustains respect that can facilitate constructive conversation.

It encourages open communication. Effective communication can only be sustained in a non-threatening environment where both partners can express their feelings and opinions. When one or both partners feel attacked, dismissed, or invalidated, returning to respect and courtesy can de-escalate a conflict, allowing communication to flow more effectively.

It helps to achieve a common goal. When partners believe they are respected and their perspective is heard, they are more likely to work together to find common ground and achieve a common goal. Courtesy and consideration of each other set the stage for effective listening and role-taking. Once both partners agree on the goal, possible solutions emerge, and a collaborative solution is easier to accomplish.

Treating each other with common courtesy and simply being nice can help reduce hostility and conflict. It can help rebuild an emotional and psychological environment that is more conducive to effective communication and problem-solving. By paying attention to and respecting the other's perspective, partners can create an open and safe environment for communication. A safe environment encourages risk-taking. Partners are more likely to let down defenses, listen, understand the other's perspective, and become willing to collaborate on finding solutions. Effective communication and collaborative problem-solving promote the growth of a strong and healthy partnership.



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