



# Constructive conflict: Healthy communication styles in relationships

There are joys, affirmations, and arguments in every relationship. That's no secret. No one is perfect and no relationship is either. However, there are ways to communicate that can help you listen to your partners, friends, roommates, and colleagues- and leave feeling respected. Check out some healthy communication tips for ideas on how to have effective conflict.

For an example, we'll use this scenario:

*Sam and Alex have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for several years. They are both college students: Alex is a working college student and Sam is not. During the summer when they both had more free time, Sam and Alex hung out every day. Now that school is back in session and Alex is working a lot, they spend less time together. This irritates Sam because they want to spend more time with Alex. Alex is frustrated by Sam's irritation—Alex has to work to afford school—and thinks they should take a break.*

The complicated task of balancing school, work and a relationship is a reality for many students. Let's look at some healthy communication styles to facilitate discussion in all types of relationships.

## Match intent with impact

The intent part of this is what you mean, and the impact is what the other

person **thinks** you mean. You want to make sure that these two things are synonymous; otherwise there can be some mixed signals between you and your partner. In Sam and Alex's situation, Alex may say to Sam, "You know I have to work to afford school and have a really tight schedule; it's hard for me to balance everything sometimes." Sam may interpret this in a completely different way, thinking that Alex doesn't love them enough to spend time with them.

## Avoid mind reading

You want to make sure you're not making assumptions about what your partner is thinking. For instance, if Alex says they need to talk about their relationship, Sam might assume that Alex means that they want to break up and will go into the conversation with this frame of mind. In reality, Alex might not mean that at all. Sam has just engaged in mind reading.

## Use "I" language

Always speak for yourself. By doing this, you can automatically avoid mind reading. For example, Sam can say to Alex, "**I feel** upset that you have to work so much during the school year and I don't get to see you as often." Alex could then say to Sam, "**I feel** frustrated when you get upset with me for not spending as much time with you, because you know I have to work to afford to go to school."





## Document

It can help to cite specific examples of the issue at hand. In Sam and Alex's situation, Sam could cite specific examples of when Sam and Alex had plans to hang out and they had to cancel because of Alex's work. Alex could also mention examples of times when Sam has gotten upset about not spending enough time together.

## Listen non-defensively

Focus on what your partner is saying and feeling. Arguing isn't about winning- it's about being and feeling heard. In Alex and Sam's situation, because both of them have arguments of their own to make, it's important that they take turns speaking about their complaints, in order to give each other's concerns space to be heard.

## Edit

You want to make sure you don't say things to your partner that could be deliberately hurtful or irrelevant to the situation. In the simplest terms, think before you speak. Provide feedback & paraphrasing  
It's important to add brief vocalizations, such as "uh huh", "okay", or nodding of your head and repeating in your own words what you think your partner meant. Try using a phrase such as, "So what you're saying is..." or "What I think you meant is...is this correct?" Your partner will feel heard and you will find out for sure whether you're interpreting their position correctly.

## Validate

Tell your partner that, given their experience, you can see why they might think that way. In Alex and Sam's situation, Alex can say to Sam, "Given your point of view, I can see why you would be upset with me that we don't get to spend as much time together as we used to." Sam can say to Alex, "From what you shared with me, I can see why it's so important to you to work so you can afford to go to school."

## Fight fair

Make sure to not make sarcastic or insulting remarks, do not bring up former partners, do not threaten to leave or out your partner, and don't try to play amateur psychologist. For example, in Alex and Sam's situation, it would be inappropriate for Alex to say to Sam, "You're only feeling neglected by me because your mom left when you were little and you have abandonment issues." Remember to respect each other.

Arguments happen and conflict can be made constructive and trust-building. By using some of these healthy communication styles, you can learn more effective ways to be in conflict, which could ultimately lead to better outcomes for your relationships, whether that is helping you discover that it needs to shift, or sustaining them better into the future.

*Updated 3/2019. Adapted from "Arguing Objectively: Healthy Communication Styles for Partners" by Sex Out Loud. Sex Out Loud Blog. Posted March 29, 2012. Accessed February 20, 2013.  
<http://sexoutloud.com/wordpress/2012/03/29/arguing-objectively-healthy-communication-styles-for-partner>*

