Relationship Enhancement: Skills For Growing Your Relationship

Included in this handout are several exercises and examples for skills that can enhance your relationship, even during conflict. These skills include:

- A goal-setting exercise
- Problem/Conflict resolution skills
- Communication clarification practice
- Examples of relationship-enhancement dialogue

Regular practice of these skills, while at first unfamiliar, will become more comfortable. All the best as you learn relationship enhancement.

Relationship Enhancement Skills for Growth

Research has shown that four basic ingredients cause a relationship to grow, whatever the challenges. These four skills are:

1. Empathy—Readiness to understand our own needs, preferences and motivations, together with those of others.
2. Acceptance—Of our own needs, and those of the other person as being valid. Also, of the fact that we need each other and that we are distinct/different from one another.
3. Dialogue—Speaking in ways that keep communication open and using a style of speaking that keeps dialogue going.
4. Expression of Feelings—We have feelings about everything we do—or we wouldn’t do it. Being honest about, and taking ownership of, our feelings helps build understanding.

A set of skills will be given you that will build these four skill areas, thus enhancing your relationship.

A Dialogue Using Relationship Enhancement Skills

Andy: My integrity is really, really important to me and feeling that my being a responsible person and you don’t feel that way upsets me incredibly. It upsets me because I don’t feel I’m an irresponsible person and it upsets me that you don’t think I’m a responsible person and it upsets me to the point of total anger and it’s really important to me.

Ginny: You’re really, really angry that I would think that you’re not a responsible person because being responsible is something that you see as central to your integrity and it is very, very important to you being responsible and it makes you really, really upset and angry that I would think you were not responsible.

---

1 Source: Adapted from B.G. Gingsberg (1997), Relationship Enhancement Family Therapy, John Wiley.
Andy: It makes me angry to think that if because I have an image of you writing a list of my characteristics down that near the top of the list would be irresponsible because I don’t finish jobs or don’t put my clothes away when—that ought to be about fifteenth on the list after a whole slew of other things that I think are important and it’s real important for me to feel that. I am a responsible person with you. Your feeling about me as an irresponsible person is real important to me in a negative fashion.

Ginny: It’s real important to you that I not think of you as an irresponsible person and you’re having a mental image of me making all that stuff characteristic about you with irresponsibility at the top of the list and you’re very upset because for me to label you irresponsible for not finishing jobs or picking up clothes makes you really angry because I would do that and it upsets you.

Ginny: It’s real important that I think of you as responsible because my opinion of you is really important to you. Can I switch?

Andy: Your opinion of me is extremely important to me and I want you to know it.

Ginny: My opinion of you is extremely important to you and you want me to know it.

Andy: It hurts my feelings incredibly to think that you would not respect my feelings or responsibilities. It’s real important and I want you to know.

Ginny: It really hurts you to think that I wouldn’t understand how strong your feelings of responsibility are and you want me to know that.

Andy: Switch.

Ginny: It makes me feel happy to know that you care so much about my opinion of you. It makes me feel a little afraid how important my opinion of you is, yet I’m surprised. I didn’t understand that you cared so deeply about my opinion of you--it’s hard for me to think about. I feel like a different species or something because I don’t think about listing your characteristics--I wasn’t wedded to the term “irresponsible.”

**Guidelines for the Goal Hierarchy List**

This exercise is to help you consider more deeply what your goals are for yourself and in your relationships. These goals will be used as topics for skill-learning practice. The goal hierarchy list should be updated regularly and used in home practice.

- Choose 5 to 10 goals for your list.
- This is to be done on your own. You are not to share your list with each other until the next session. This is to make sure that your list is not influenced by any other person’s list. Later, it will be fun to see which goals you share and which are different.
- Rank the goals from 1 to 10 in difficulty, with 1 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest.
- The goals should deal with initiating something new, improving something, and working
through a problem or conflict.

- Try to balance positive and negative goals.
- Try to include feelings in each goal statement (e.g., “It’s important to me,” “I’d like that,” “I’m unhappy about that,” “I’m hurt by that,” “That would make me feel good”).
- Try to include the underlying positive message in each statement (e.g., “Because you’re important to me,” “I love you,” “I feel good when you do that,” “I like to please you”).
- Try to make these statements as specific as you can without accusation or judgment.
- It’s important to choose goals that you want to share with the other person.
- Make sure that your goals are realistic, that you’ll be able to carry them out, and that you will have the opportunity to work on and accomplish them.
- Review your goals weekly and update them.
- Bring the list to each session.

**How Conflict is Handled in Relationship Enhancement**

Fran and Stan are having a disagreement about one of their children. Here is a transcript of their conversation.

Fran: I was angry and hurt when I depended upon you to take care of Allison and you didn’t do what you said you would do.

Stan: You’re angry with me and hurt by that.

Fran: You’re darn right. You know how exhausted I was, but I had to get up to take care of Allison.

Stan: You didn’t like that.

Fran: No, and particularly your coming in all the time to ask me what to do.

Stan: Well, I feel badly that you are angry with me about that and guilty and frustrated that I couldn’t please you.

Fran: You’re upset that I’m angry with you.

Stan: Yes, I’m always afraid that you’ll criticize me whenever I take care of Allison. That’s why I came in to ask you what to do.

Fran: You’re afraid I’ll criticize you.

Stan: I am afraid of that, but I also feel guilty and inadequate because of that.

Fran: That makes you feel bad.

Stan: Real bad!

Fran: I’m concerned you feel that way and feel guilty myself that you are afraid I’ll be critical.
Stan: You feel guilty that I’m afraid you’ll be critical.

Fran: I do. I just worry you won’t do the right thing, but I want to try to trust you more.

Stan: You’d like that.

Fran: Yes!

Stan: That makes me feel good and I’ll try harder the next time to take care of her and not bother you while you’re resting.

**Guidelines for Problem/Conflict Resolution Skills**

**Things to Keep in Mind**

- Differences and conflicts are inevitable in all relationships because we are different.
- The resolution of the problem/conflict is less important than how we go about resolving it.
- In all close relationships, positive feelings always underlie problems and conflicts.
- If we understand each other’s feelings, the problem changes.
- Sometimes the resolution is to accept that we can’t find a resolution. this also can lead to compromise.
- Some problems take years to change and pop up periodically, becoming less and less frequent as things improve.
- Choose an appropriate time and place for problem resolution. If one of the parties is not ready, take more time before beginning.

**Steps to Problem/Conflict Resolution**

- Review your own feelings and perceptions to more clearly understand your position.
- Own your feelings.
- Take the time to understand each other’s feelings (use speaking, listening, interactive/engagement skills).
- Make sure that you understand each other’s feelings before attempting a solution.
- Check with the other person to be sure of his or her feelings (e.g., “You feel . . . about . . . It’s important that I understand . . .”).
- As you understand each other’s feelings, acknowledge the underlying positive feelings (e.g., “What upsets me is that you are so important to me that when you don’t kiss me when you leave, I get really hurt”).
- Be behaviorally specific (e.g., “When you leave your socks on the floor, it really makes me mad. It would please me if you would put them in the hamper instead.”)
- Try to talk about one issue at a time.
- Admit to your partner when you can’t think of a solution, and state that it would make you feel good if he or she could suggest one.
- Shake hands or select some other mutual action to indicate agreement.
- Write down what you agreed on in very specific terms.
- Agree on a specific time to meet to review the success of the agreement (e.g., in a week
or a month).

- Agree on ways to reinforce the other person when he or she responds to the agreement.
- Be flexible when discussing how the agreement can be changed if it doesn’t work.

**STUCK? LOST?**

**A Compass to Get Dialogue Going Again**

Sometimes feelings are so powerful we can get lost. We know we’re angry, afraid, or confused with the other person, but we don’t know what to say or what will help.

When this happens in the midst of dialogue, particularly in conflict, use these “jump-starters” as a compass to point the way out of the “stuck spot.”

**Speaker:** Complete any of the following:

I feel . . .
I’m afraid that . . .
I feel sad that . . .
I feel frustrated that . . .
I need . . .
I hope . . .
It would help me if . . .

**Speaker,** keep using these jump-starters to get unstuck. When dialogue is going again, remember to switch.

**Listener:** Keep reflecting back what you hear.

(Hint: Sometimes you may need to be alone for awhile to calm down, then write-out your answers to the jump-starters. If so, be sure to tell your partner that is what you need, and that you’ll be back.)

**Relationship Enhancement Skills Instructions for Home Practice**

1. Set aside one hour to one and a half hours at the same time each week. An alternative time should also be chosen in case an emergency prevents the conversation from occurring.
2. Make sure that you meet in a comfortable place at home. Also, make sure that you will not be interrupted (by children or phone) during this time.
3. Each week one of you is designated as the first SPEAKER. It is your responsibility to think of a topic and begin the conversation. This responsibility alternates from week to week.
4. It is the responsibility of the partner who is first listener for that week to remind the first speaker shortly before the designated time. Also, it is the listener’s responsibility to prepare the tape recorder and tape. (All sessions are recorded and then reviewed in office sessions.)
The Basic Rules

Speaker

1. Make no judgments or accusations, and ask no questions.
2. Own your statement and feelings.
3. State the feeling that is the basis (motivation) for your statements.
4. State your message in a few sentences so that your listener can grasp your meaning. Remember that you can continue until you are satisfied that your partner understands your meaning.
5. Remember that it may be hard for your partner to continue to listen if you speak for a long time before switching.
6. You, as speaker, control the switch. Say “Switch” to indicate that you are willing to give up the speaker position and become a listener. Say “Switch” only after your partner has reflected your last statement.

Listener

1. Make no judgments or accusations, and ask no questions.
2. Remember not to give your point of view at all until you are speaker.
3. Reflect back (acknowledge) what the speaker has just said, and include the feeling that pertains to the message.
4. When listening, remember that you are accepting what the speaker is saying and feeling, not agreeing.
5. Also, remember that even though you have restated what the speaker has said exactly, the speaker may not mean that and may want to restate it. It is important to accept that and try to reflect the new statement by the speaker.
6. If you feel accused or judged by what the speaker is saying, you can state that (“I feel judged or accused”). The speaker then tries to restate it without judgment.
7. If the speaker fails to state the feeling that pertains to the statement, you can say, “I’m not sure what you are feeling.” The speaker then will state the feeling. You as listener can identify the feeling yourself, if you are comfortable doing that. For example: The speaker says, “It’s hot outside.” You as listener say, “You’re uncomfortable” or “You like that,” whichever the speaker seems to imply.

Switching

1. The speaker is always responsible for the switch.
2. The listener can request the switch, but the speaker can say a little more to be sure the listener understands before switching.
3. The listener must reflect the last think the speaker says before the switch can occur.
4. After the switch, the new speaker must begin by stating how he or she feels to know the feelings of the former speaker. After that, the new speaker can talk about anything important to that person.

Home Practice

1. Remember not to direct the other person. If you have to state your discomfort, own your feelings.
2. If either party feels uncomfortable and wants to stop at any time, that person says, “I’d like to stop now.” The other person says “Okay” and stops. The conversation ends at that point. The person requesting the stop is free to be alone. It is that person’s responsibility to indicate when he or she is ready to resume contact. The other person respects that and trusts that the first person will make contact again when ready.

3. When contact is renewed, there is no obligation to continue talking about the issue discussed at the time of stopping.