

When Communication Breaks Down

Why conversations can turn into arguments, silence or misunderstanding

Communication difficulties rarely begin because two people simply do not care. Often both people care deeply, but they are trying to communicate while carrying different expectations, histories, fears, sensory needs, ways of processing language and ways of protecting themselves. One person may want to talk immediately while the other needs time to process. One may ask questions to understand while the other experiences those questions as criticism. A practical response may be intended as help but received as emotional distance. The same words can therefore land very differently from the way they were intended.

When this happens repeatedly, couples and family members can start reacting not only to the conversation happening now, but to every similar conversation that came before it. A small disagreement can quickly become connected to older feelings of being ignored, criticised, controlled, rejected or misunderstood. Recognising this pattern is not about deciding who is right. It is about slowing the interaction down enough to understand what each person is actually experiencing.

What communication breakdown can look like

It may look like repeated arguments about the same subject, one person shutting down, conversations becoming defensive, interrupting, raised voices, sarcasm, avoiding difficult topics, sending long messages instead of speaking, walking away without explaining why, or agreeing simply to end the conflict. It can also be much quieter: feeling lonely beside somebody you love, filtering everything you say, or believing there is no point trying to explain because you will be misunderstood again.

The aim is not perfect communication. The aim is enough safety, curiosity and clarity for both people to have a voice.

Look underneath the argument

The visible argument is not always the real issue. An argument about housework may contain feelings about fairness, recognition or exhaustion. A disagreement about being late may involve predictability or anxiety. A conversation about a forgotten task may be connected to ADHD and working memory for one person and to feeling unimportant for the other. Looking underneath the subject can change the question from 'Who is wrong?' to 'What is happening for each of us here?'

Neurodivergence can matter

Autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent differences can affect processing speed, attention, working memory, emotional regulation, sensory load, interpretation of tone and the ability to find words under pressure. A person may need a pause before responding, may communicate more directly, may forget something they genuinely intended to remember, or may become unable to continue a conversation when overwhelmed. These differences do not remove responsibility for how people treat each other, but understanding them can prevent difference being automatically interpreted as lack of care.

Changing the Pattern

A useful first step is noticing the moment the conversation stops being productive. The body often notices before the mind does: a racing heart, clenched jaw, urge to escape, rapid speech, going blank, feeling hot, crying, shaking or becoming unusually quiet. A pause at this point can be protective rather than avoidant when both people know that the conversation will be returned to.

Try changing one part of the conversation at a time. Speak about one issue rather than bringing in every previous disagreement. Describe your experience rather than assuming the other person's intention. Replace 'you never listen' with something more specific such as 'I don't feel heard when I am interrupted before I have finished.' Ask what the other person understood you to mean. Sometimes the discovery that two people heard completely different messages is the beginning of repair.

A simple conversation reset

1. Pause	Notice when either person is too overwhelmed to communicate safely or clearly.
2. Name	Describe what is happening without attacking: 'We're both getting upset and I don't want us to hurt each other.'
3. Regulate	Take agreed time to settle. This might mean quiet, movement, sensory regulation, breathing or being alone.
4. Return	Agree when the conversation will resume so a pause does not become indefinite avoidance.
5. Clarify	Ask: 'What did you hear me saying?' and 'What were you trying to tell me?'
6. Repair	Acknowledge impact, apologise where appropriate and decide what could be different next time.

Questions to explore together

What usually happens just before our conversations go wrong? What does each of us do when we feel criticised, frightened, rejected or overwhelmed? Do we need different amounts of processing time? Are there subjects that carry older hurt? What helps each of us feel listened to? What does a genuine apology look like to each of us? What would make difficult conversations feel safer?

When communication is more than a communication problem

Communication techniques are not a solution to abuse. If there is intimidation, threats, coercive control, stalking, physical or sexual violence, deliberate isolation, financial control, or fear about what may happen when you disagree, the priority is safety and specialist support rather than learning to communicate more effectively with the person causing harm. Relationship counselling may also be inappropriate where abuse or coercive control is present.

When additional support may help

Individual therapy, couples therapy or relationship counselling can provide a structured place to understand patterns that have become difficult to change alone. Support can be particularly useful when conversations repeatedly escalate, trust has been damaged, neurodivergent needs are being misunderstood, major life changes have altered the relationship, or one or both people carry trauma that is affecting connection in the present.

Books to explore

Hold Me Tight by Sue Johnson explores emotional connection and recurring couple patterns.

Nonviolent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg offers a framework for expressing needs and listening with less blame. **The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work** by John Gottman and Nan Silver discusses research-informed relationship patterns and practical exercises. Readers should take what is useful and remember that no single relationship model fits everyone.

A gentle reminder

A difficult conversation does not automatically mean a relationship is failing. Sometimes it means two people have reached the limit of their current way of communicating. Learning what sits beneath the words - and making room for different ways of processing, feeling and expressing needs - can create a different kind of conversation.

Support Hub note: This resource is for information and reflection and is not a substitute for individual clinical advice or emergency support. If you are frightened of someone you are in a relationship with or are in immediate danger, seek appropriate specialist or emergency support.