

Truth be told

Has people pleasing and not saying how you feel and what you need led you into awkward situations? Anita Chaudhuri explores how to be honest and authentic when communicating in your relationships, so you can find your voice and express your emotions and opinions effectively

Of course, in an ideal world, we would all have easy and frank communication in each of our significant relationships. There's just one tiny snag – how do we go about *actually* doing that? Why rock the boat by speaking up about things that are probably not even that important in the grand scheme, right?

Wrong, say the relationship experts. Although most people would stop short of embracing the philosophy of America's Radical Honesty movement, where no truth is too harsh to be doled out, all in the name of authenticity, there is a way to preserve the sensitivities of our nearest and dearest while still putting across our point of view and feelings.

But if you're an inveterate people pleaser, you might balk at the idea of being even partially honest. What's wrong with keeping everyone happy? Quite a lot, as it happens. 'Without honest communication, you get boredom and stagnation,' says couple and relationship psychotherapist Matt Davies. 'People pleasing leads to boring relationships. It also leads to boring sex between partners, because when you're not being honest, when you're aiming to make the

other party happy, you're placating. There's this sense of merging.' Davies says therapists often refer to these types of partnerships as 'babes in the wood' couples.

'Everything between them is always just beautiful, but there's no spark, no fire! In therapy, we often focus on the need for partners to differentiate. Achieving that requires each of you to be vulnerable, which in

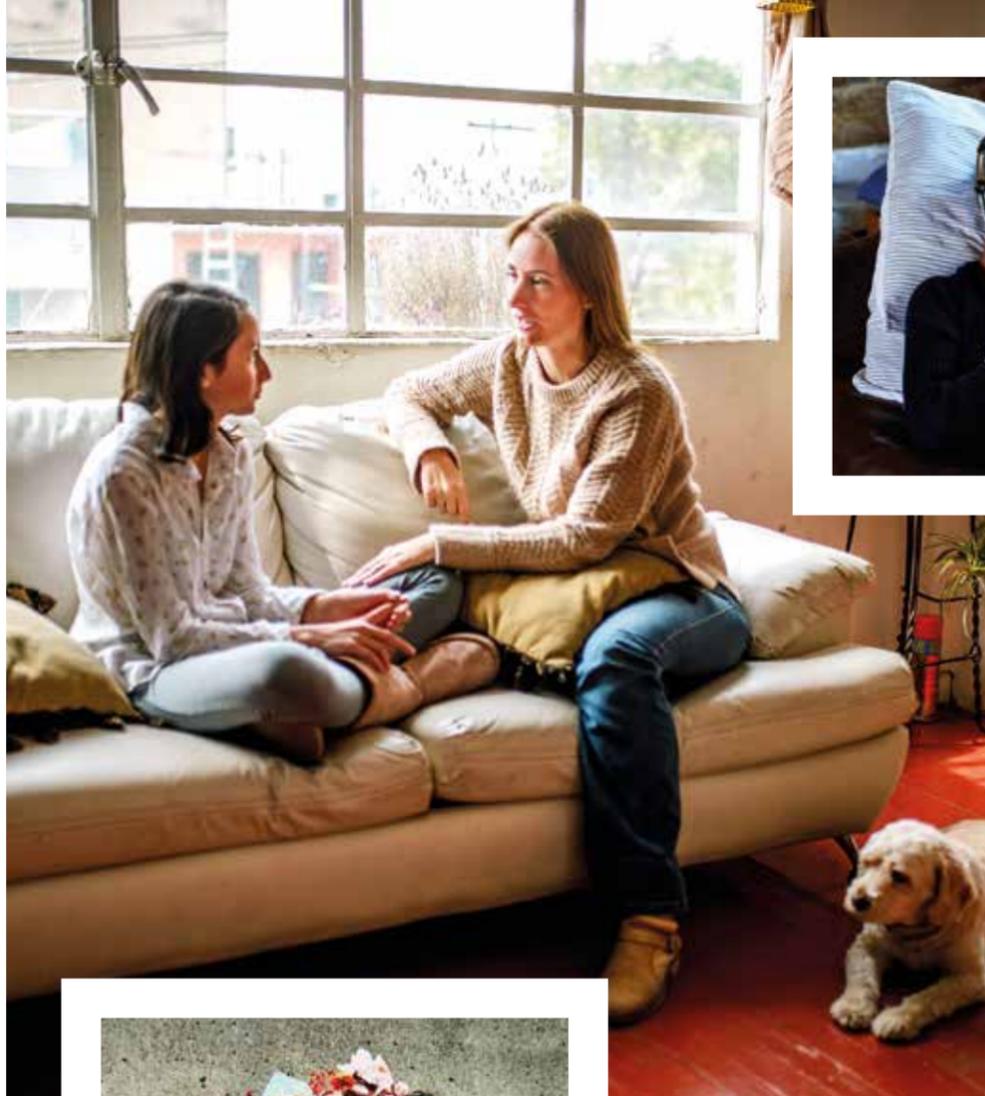
turn builds greater intimacy and excitement. If you're willing to show yourself as you really are, that actually helps the other partner feel safer. Chances are good that they will also harbour some fear about not being good enough. So, when you reveal your vulnerability to them, they're thinking, "Oh, they're just like me, so I have nothing to fear," says Davies.

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Let it go to grow

So, what's stopping us from daring to be more authentic? 'Many of us are dealing with fear of rejection,' says Sam Owen, relationship coach and author of *Happy Relationships: 7 Simple Rules To Create Harmony And Growth* (Orion, £14.99). 'It's ironic that in this social media age, we share more of ourselves than ever before. That means we're also exposing ourselves more – and we're doing so in arenas where we didn't

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“ I think for any relationship to be successful, there needs to be loving communication, appreciation and understanding ”

MIRANDA KERR





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

PETER DRUCKER

previously have this potential for personal sharing.’

Owen cites the example of how some employers now actively encourage staff to share personal posts on social media to make a brand seem more approachable and relatable: ‘You may find yourself being asked to do a Facebook or Instagram Live,’ she says.

You could be forgiven for thinking all this sharing would make it easier to be more honest, but it can actually lead to the reverse. ‘When you put yourself out there, you can fall prey to harsh criticism, maybe from only one or two people but that can still affect you. If people are being judgmental and aggressive online, that can filter into the way you think and behave offline,’ says Owen. The net result can be wariness about sharing anything at all.

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about.” Or, if you want to go further, you might say: “I’ve been thinking... I’ve not really spoken up much in the past about where I’d like to go for dinner.” So, you’re kind of explaining yourself in a way that makes it feel softer and easier to broach.’

Owen also points out that if you want someone to see your point of view or change their behaviour, it’s always more effective if you explain why. ‘If you do that, you’re giving them credit for understanding but, more importantly, you’re more likely to get them on board with it if they understand the reasoning behind it.’

Put the past behind you

The golden rule, according to Owen, is to focus a difficult conversation on your goals and desires, rather than your fears and dislikes. So, for example, if you’re tackling your

partner about why they never do their share of the chores, resist the temptation to present them with a well-rehearsed list of all the things you do that they never help out with.

‘Instead, focus on what you’d like their help with. Try and use positive rather than negative words because research shows that negative, critical words can put both the listener and the speaker into a stress response. When that happens, the other person is only going to become more and more

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Speak up gently without falling out

If you’ve never been in the habit of speaking up for yourself, doing so can feel daunting. But there’s no need to blurt out everything that’s on your mind in one conversation. Owen suggests starting out mildly. Say, for example, your partner or friend has strong views about where to go for dinner and you always go along with them: ‘Try saying something like, “Actually, I’d quite like to try a new place I read

The ‘three conversations’

Having a tricky exchange with a loved one need not be as complicated as you might expect. Here’s how you can break it down, sort it out and move forward from conflict

IN THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING BOOK, *Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most* by Bruce Patton, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen (Penguin, £9.99), the authors assert that every exchange that takes place usually contains three conversations. Once you understand this, it helps you navigate potentially stormy waters.

1 The ‘What Happened?’ Conversation. What do you believe was said and done?
2 The Feelings Conversation. The emotional impact of everyone involved.

3 The Identity Conversation. What does it mean for everyone’s opinion of themselves? It is this last conversation that is often overlooked. Known as the ‘intention – impact’

gap, the larger this is, the harder the conversation will be. In order to move forward, ask yourself, what assumptions am I making about what the other person intended by their actions?

defensive and combative, or run away,' says Owen.

The other guiding principle, Owen suggests, is to focus on the here and now, rather than dragging up events or accusations from the past. Uploading a catalogue of past sins isn't beneficial. 'It's not helpful to colour what's happening now with stuff that's happened in the past. For a start, all of that could have come about for very different reasons to now.'

Learn to read the signs

It isn't only the sentiments or words being uttered that count with communication though, a point that often goes unacknowledged. Body language and other non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, have a powerful impact on how we relate to one another. In fact, research shows that the brain subconsciously picks up on inconsistencies between the spoken word and non-verbal signals.

'Tone of voice, posture, the way the body is moving, gestures and facial expressions – all these things are signalling to the other person how you are thinking and feeling deep down,' says Owen. She suggests that we can use this to our advantage, particularly during fraught conversations. 'If your partner is telling you that everything is "fine" but their face says otherwise, you could point that out. You might say: "Well, you say that, but you look a little bit sad. Is there something that is bothering you?" That could lead to a solution.'

Temper your temper

Is there advice, however, for someone such as myself, who is liable to fly off the handle in the heat of the moment? 'Some people really can't think clearly in the midst of a conversation that they find difficult,' says Owen. 'People sometimes tell me that they don't know how to communicate without going all-out scary and aggressive or, instead, they retreat and sulk for days. Neither of those types of behaviour is helpful in a relationship.'

Alternatively, Owen suggests that it's best to have a line that you can use to explain yourself. 'You might try: "I'm feeling quite upset by X, but I can't really put

into words why. Can I come back to you about that later?" That way, you're communicating that you feel upset and you've put a pin in the issue, so it's on the agenda. And, by acknowledging the upset you feel, it takes some of the sting out of it. Research shows that if you identify negative emotions with the correct word label, that helps take you out of a fight or flight response. Also, by acknowledging your feelings, you will have affirmed your self-worth,' she says.

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Another tip is to focus on asking questions rather than coming to a difficult conversation with a long list of statements you want to get across. 'If you give the other person a genuine opportunity to respond, that can help clear up any assumptions on either side. If you simply make a lot of accusations, that is just telling the person that you have made up your mind and you're not interested in hearing their point of view.'

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Ask for what you want

Talking honestly about sex, especially if you're no longer enjoying it, can be a minefield. Davies mentions running a workshop series for couples entitled Passionate Partnerships. 'We presented the question – are you a sexy couple or a couple who has sex? Many couples who took part mentioned that they had drifted into being housemates.'

Davies asserts that honest communication about sex is about taking risks. 'You are putting yourself on the line and revealing your true self. That is exciting, both for you and your partner, if it's done in the right way. They can see that you're on the edge, in a good way.'

The key is not to criticise. 'You might say: "Hey, how about we try X?", rather than saying: "I find Y so boring" or "you always want to do this or that". Shift the focus onto something new. Setting another goal sexually is a really exciting ambition for your relationship.'

According to Davies, 'sexy couples' are people who take risks every day with micro doses of communication. 'Every time you dare to say to your partner "I prefer X", even about little things, keeps the spark >>>



“When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant and effective”

STEPHEN COVEY

“The way we communicate with others and ourselves ultimately determines the quality of our lives”

TONY ROBBINS



alive because it's about acknowledging difference. And then that's incredibly appealing because, you know, that's why you were attracted to one another in the first place!

Steer friendships in the right direction

The quality of our friendships is super important, but the topic is often not addressed in conversations about intimacy and connection. 'I believe that the same rules apply with friends as with any other relationship, even if it perhaps feels like there's less of a commitment with friends,' says Davies. 'Friendships are still about psychological intimacy, being able to say what you're feeling and thinking.'

Often, what can happen in close friendships is that we use one another as a safe space to vent about things that are going wrong in our lives. That can be great, but can also get out of hand. 'In those cases, there are ways of steering friendships in a more satisfying direction without necessarily having to hurt someone's feelings by saying: "Oh, not again

– you're always going on about your flipping mother!" Venting needs to be confronted.'

Davies has some excellent solutions. 'You might say: "Maybe you need to talk this over with somebody as

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this is powerful stuff. It's quite overwhelming to listen to and I appreciate that you really need to talk it through." It's getting underneath their feelings and helping them recognise that they've been so busy offloading, they have forgotten to ask about you.'

In any relationship, there's a danger that one party gets cast in the role of sympathetic listener. 'The way of managing that is to find your assertiveness and begin to take agency in the relationship.

Try and begin new conversations, or you could say: "I'd like to bring up something that I'd value your opinion on because I've been worrying about it." The key thing is to take responsibility for your part in the relationship and not just play the victim and complain about your friend who's always going off on monologues.'

For more information, see mattdavies.org and relationshipscoach.co.uk

How to have an honest discussion online

Mediator and coach Enda Young offers useful advice on having open, productive conversations, being a good listener and resolving issues – without being in the same room

1 Set the scene. Get rid of distractions – shut your door and close down multiple windows on your browser. The clearer we can make our expression, the closer to a real interaction it becomes.

to yourself in your inner voice will be reflected on your face. This becomes much more obvious on a video call than in real life, so it's much better to show up in a calm and happy mood than trying to fake it.

an invitation to go deeper for longer. People feel listened to and that's a vital part of dealing with criticism.

2 Have an idea of what you might say. If you envisage it's going to be a tough conversation, work out your strategy. Plan it, don't script it. What do you want out of the conversation? Focus on that.

4 Try mirroring. This is a technique that involves repeating a person's words back to them. It needs to be done with genuineness behind it though. An example would be, if someone says to you: 'Saturday was really difficult for me.' You might say: 'Saturday?' That simple word repetition opens things up. The other person automatically hears it as a question,

5 Practise active listening. Author Stephen Covey said: 'Most people do not listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply.' It's much more obvious on a video call if your attention has drifted. Practise putting your tongue to the roof of your mouth as a way of staying present as you listen. If you're struggling, turn off the camera.

3 Listen to a favourite piece of music first. Be aware that how you talk

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