



**“We Can’t
Communicate”**

"We Can't Communicate"

By Dr. Margaret Paul

What do you really mean when you say, "We can't communicate"?

The issue with understanding what this means is what you mean by "communicate."

All too often, when a partner states, "We can't communicate," what he or she means is "I can't get my partner to listen to me and understand things from my point of view." And underneath this is, "If my partner only understood things through my eyes, he or she would then change and do things my way."

So what partners often mean when they say, "We can't communicate," is "I want to control my partner and he or she won't listen."

Think about the last time you tried to communicate with your partner. Now, be honest with yourself - why did you want to communicate?

The chances are that if what you wanted to communicate about was an interesting or funny situation that happened to you, or about your own learning and growth with no agenda for your partner to change, your partner was more than willing to listen. But if you wanted to communicate about your feelings of unhappiness about something your partner did or was doing, your partner was not so receptive. Or your partner might tune you out if you were being a victim and complaining about someone or a situation and wanting sympathy rather than real help.

Too often, communicating your "feelings" is a way of making your partner responsible for your feelings. He or she has to change for you to feel okay, or do something to take responsibility for your feelings. When this is the case, your partner might be less than enthusiastic about communicating, because his or her experience is that you are using your feelings as a form of blame and control. No one likes to be at the other end of that.

When couples consult with me and state "We can't communicate," I immediately know that, in one way or another, they are both trying to control each other rather than learn. What they really mean is that they can't communicate about problems because one or both are not open to learning about themselves and the other. One or both are

trying to get the other to change rather than learn about how they are each creating their own problems or the problem between them, and what loving actions they each need to take.

Many couples, at the beginning of their relationship, say, "We can talk to each other for hours." Yet later in the relationship they "can't communicate." This is because at the beginning of the relationship they were not making the other person responsible for their feelings, nor trying to control the other person. They were sharing themselves and listening to the other to LEARN about each other.

However, within a short time of moving into a committed relationship, they often stop learning and start controlling. Instead of giving and sharing, they are now trying to get something from each other. They get stuck in a system where they each want control over getting what they want from the other person - understanding, acceptance, time, attention, approval, affection, sex. As soon as they try to have control over getting what they want, they are likely to get into power struggles, as one or both resist being controlled, or one continually gives in and then feels used and resentful.

When you each learn how to take responsibility for your own feelings, let go of trying to control the other, and move into an intent to learn about yourself and each other, you will regain your ability to communicate. You don't even need to "learn how to communicate"! Good communication is natural when the intent of the communication is to learn rather than to control.

This is what learning and practicing Inner Bonding teaches you!

Why Do You Want to Communicate With Your Partner?

Dr. Margaret Paul

When partners are having problems, they often say that the problem is communication. What exactly does this mean? What are they trying to communicate?

There are various reasons for communicating:

- Sometimes we communicate to offer information about ourselves, such as, "I'm going out for a walk," or "The dinner

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reservations are for 7:00."

- Sometimes we communicate to ask for help with tasks, such as, "I need to move the couch to clean under it and I can't lift it. Would you help me?"
- Sometimes we communicate to learn something about the other person, such as "Please help me to understand why you are feeling upset with me. I care about you and I really want to understand."
- Sometimes we communicate to ask for help regarding ourselves, such as, "I'm feeling very anxious and I don't know why. Would you talk with me for a while? Maybe if I talk about it I will understand it."

For the most part, these forms of communication do not cause problems, unless there is an ulterior motive. An ulterior motive occurs when the intention of the communication is to have some control over the other person. When the intent of the above communications is to offer information, ask for help, or to learn, then there will likely not be problems. But these same communications can be spoken with the intent to control. The intent to control will be communicated through a harsh or judgmental tone of voice and through a hard, closed energy.

For example, "I'm going for a walk!" said with anger, has behind it an intent to control the other person through punishment. The real communication is "You have behaved in a way that is unacceptable to me so I am punishing you by withdrawing from you." "The dinner reservations are for 7:00," can be said in a tone that says, "...and you better be there."

Asking for help in moving the couch can be either a request or a demand, depending upon the intent. A request can be answered, "Sorry, I'm really busy right now. I will help you later," without repercussions. When the same thing is said as a demand, the other person is not allowed to say no without negative consequences.

You can ask someone why he or she is upset with you from a true desire to learn, or from the intent to control. When your intent is to control, you will likely argue with whatever the person says, trying to talk him or her out of the upset.

When you are upset, you can ask for help because you really do want to learn and take responsibility for your feelings, or because you want the other person to fix you, to take care of you, to rescue you. People often want to communicate their feelings to get the other person to change, rather than to learn and take responsibility for their feelings.

Problems with communication will always occur when the intent is to control. So when clients of mine say, "We can't communicate," I know that one or both of them are coming from the intent to control in their communications. They are intent on trying to get the other person to change.

The intent to control often creates power struggles in relationships. While most people certainly want to be in control, they do not want to be controlled. So when one person is coming from the intent to control, the other person may respond with resistance. Power struggles result when one person behaves in a controlling way and the other person resists being controlled.

When one person is intent on controlling and the other gives in to keep the peace, it may seem like the relationship is working. However, the compliant person is often covertly angry and may resist in another area, such as sexually. When you give yourself up to avoid conflict, you generally resent the person you give yourself up to, which doesn't create the emotional intimacy necessary to feel sexually intimate.

Next time you want to communicate with your partner, ask yourself, "Why do I want to communicate?" If you discover that you are wanting to get the other person to change, consider doing an Inner Bonding process instead - deciding how to take care of yourself instead of trying to get your partner to change. You might discover that you get a far better result!

Intent Versus Content

Dr. Margaret Paul

In any interaction with another person, there are always two levels of communication: intent and content.

Intent refers to whether, in this moment, our deepest desire is to control or to love, to protect or to learn.

The content is the issue we may be discussing - time, money, tasks, communication, sexuality, parenting, relationships with family and friends, food, health, and so on. The content is the topic of discussion while the intent is the context, or container, within which we are interacting.

Your discussions over issues may easily disintegrate into arguments when one or both of you are choosing the intent to control. Issues cannot reach resolution unless both of you have an intent to learn. In fact, even more issues get created when one of you chooses to try to control rather than to learn, because now the controlling behavior itself - anger, judgment, blame and so on - becomes the issue.

You have no control over your partner's intent, and attempts to get him or her to open will generally be met with resistance. Trying to get your partner to open, even with niceness or kindness, is just another form of control. Most people who want to control also do not want to be controlled, and will go into resistance if they feel someone trying to control them, even if it is just to get them to open up.

The key to not creating more issues when you feel you are open to learning and your partner is not, is to accept your helplessness over your partner's intent. If you completely accept that there is nothing you can do to get him or her to listen to you, understand you, agree with you, accept you, or do what you want, then you will not pursue the discussion. You will not continue to hit your head against a wall when you have no hope of the wall coming down. When you accept that you are powerless to change your partner's intent, you will stop trying to do so.

You will stay in a dysfunctional discussion or argument when you do not accept the truth - that you have no control over getting your partner to open, agree, understand, accept, and so on. You will stay in these difficult interactions when you deny your powerlessness over your partner. You might convince yourself that if you just say the right thing, in just the right way, your partner will finally hear you and care about what you feel and want. Because of this illusion, you may exhaust yourself in fruitless arguments that leave you even more frustrated and lonely than before you began to try to talk with your partner.

While you have no control over your partner's intent, you have total control over your own intent. When you are willing to let go of your

focus on content and instead become aware of your own and your partner's intent, then you are in a position to choose the loving action for yourself. It is far more loving to yourself and your partner to disengage from combative discussions until you both are open, than to argue, lecture, convince, judge, plead, cry, blame or criticize in an attempt to change your partner's intent or point of view.

However, walking away can also be a form of control if the intent of walking away is to punish your partner. The energy you will have if you walk away in anger and blame is entirely different than the energy of disengaging and walking away because it is the loving thing to do for yourself and for the relationship. When you walk away as a loving adult, you can simply say, with no anger or blame, "Let's talk about this later, when we are both open."

Often, in my workshops and intensives, when I make the statement that it is more loving to walk away from a combative discussion than continue to argue, someone invariably says, "When I walk away, my partner often says, 'You always run away rather than stay and resolve things.' What do I do then?"

If someone blames you for peacefully disengaging, then the other person is still trying to control you. He or she hopes to hook you in with the attack. The best thing to do is not respond at all. Anything you say will be a defense or explanation and you will be right back into the fray. It is very important to keep present as a loving adult (you will learn to do this as you practice Inner Bonding) so that you don't get hooked back into the argument.

A good time to reenter the discussion is after each of you has done your own Inner Bonding work and you are both open to learning with each other. You will be surprised how easily you communicate when both people are open to learning.

Remembering to turn into the intent rather than getting stuck in the content when one or both of you are not open to learning, will keep conflicts from escalating into fights.