

EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS: IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE
TIPS AND RESOURCES



SECTION 1



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Conversation Tips

PRACTICE NOTICING THE WAYS YOU COMMUNICATE

- What words or phrases do you use regularly?
- In what situations does your tone of voice change (e.g., when happy, sad, frustrated)? Can you practice changing the tone of your voice?
- Facial expressions. Notice any tension or relaxation in your facial muscles.
- **Helpful body language and touch:**
 - Turning towards the speaker
 - Looking them in the eye
 - Putting down distractions like a phone, or muting the TV
 - Light touch on the shoulder or hand to show comfort
 - For romantic partners mutually desired hugs, cuddling, and kisses demonstrate connection
 - Others? Write down other positive body language traits that are helpful in conversations:



- **Unhelpful body language and touch:**
 - Ignoring or turning away from the speaker
 - Eye rolling
 - Smirks
 - Avoiding eye contact
 - Intense staring
 - Crossed arms (sometimes)
 - Behaviors indicating boredom such as staring at your watch, wall clock, or a phone
 - Others? Write down other positive body language traits that are helpful in conversations:

Conversation Starters

COMMUNICATING MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS

When Your Family Or Friends Don't Understand Your Diagnosis Or Symptoms

- Bring family or a friend to the doctor with you to help them better understand the disease and your symptoms.
- Watch a webinar, read a book, or blog article together on the difficult topic.

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"I know you find my MS symptoms confusing. Would you like to come to the neurologist with me or watch a Can Do webinar to learn more about what's going on with my MS?"*
- *"What you see when you look at me is just the tip of the MS iceberg. Most of my symptoms aren't visible but I would be happy to explain them or given you reading material to help you understand what's going on."*

When You Feel Uncertain, Embarrassed Or Dismissed

- Practice talking about difficult topics, start with something small.
- Try write down the main points you want to express before the conversation.
- Learn about your family or friend's perspective, ask questions.
- Practice.

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"I'd really like to be able to make eye contact with you while we're talking. Looking up from my wheelchair gets really tiring. Would you mind sitting so we can have a really good conversation?"*
- *I hate to slow everyone down but I really enjoy being with you. Would you mind slowing down a bit so I can keep up? And next time I'll plan to bring my scooter so we can go fast together!"*

When Time Is Limited

- Schedule 30 - 60 minutes a week to talk with your partner or family about any difficulties or challenges you might be experiencing.
- Try to remove distractions from your check-ins (e.g., electronics, children, other family members).
- Try more frequent 5-10 minute check-ins during the week as an emotional thermometer.
- Consider your objectives for the check-ins (e.g., focused on a specific problem, request for more support or listening ear).

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"Our conversations are really important to me – they help us stay connected. Could we set aside a few minutes every morning or evening to check in with each other?"*
- *"I'd like to make sure we talk about the things that are really important to each of us – so maybe we could keep a running list on the nightstand to help us remember?"*

Managing Difficult Emotions In Conversation

- Take a 20-30 minute break, then come back to the conversation.
- Take notes during the conversation.
- Take deep breaths and really try to listen to your partner, ask yourself, "What is the core reason for their anger/frustration/anxiety?" Note. This may be different than what they are saying. If you are not sure ask questions.
- Try to find a point of agreement or connection. For example, you are both frustrated by a certain situation, but are disagreeing on the solution. Spend time acknowledging the point of connection and agreement – that you are both frustrated by the same situation.

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"I think we're both getting pretty emotional about this. Could we take a short break to chill out and then come back in an hour or so?"*
- *I know we're both really frustrated by this situation but we seem to have different solutions in mind. Maybe we could jot down a list of possible solutions and then figure out the best way to compromise."*

Conversation Starters

COMMUNICATING MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

When You Don't Have A Lot Of Time With Your Healthcare Team

- Write down your questions.
- Send questions or concerns ahead of the visit so your doctor knows what you want to discuss. They may also be able to answer some of your questions in writing.
- Create relationships with the nursing staff or physician assistants in your clinic. They are often available more frequently than the neurologists.
- Know your clinic's communication policy. There may be a 3 day turnaround for non-urgent email responses and 2 weeks for requested letters or paperwork.

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"I'm concerned that I may not be able to continue working much longer. Could we schedule an additional appointment to discuss my application for Society Security Disability?"*
- *"My partner and I have experienced some changes in our intimate relationship. We're not sure what's related to MS and what isn't, so we'd like to schedule an appointment to discuss that with you."*
- *"I'd like to make sure we take time today to talk about my memory. It's really gotten worse lately and I need to figure out what to do."*

When You Feel Dismissed Or Unheard

- Get a second opinion, or talk with a Nurse or PA in the clinic.
- Ask them to stop, slow down, or define the words they are using.
- Let them know you have more questions, ask if you can send an email, schedule a phone call, or schedule a follow-up appointment.

Possible Conversation Starters

- *"I have several other questions I need to ask you. Could we please schedule another appointment or phone call to go over them?"*
- *"You're giving me a lot of important information but I just can't take it all in. Could you repeat it more slowly please or write down the key points for me to take home? Perhaps next time I could bring a friend to take notes, if that would be OK with you?"*
- *"Changing my medication is a big decision for me. I'd like to get a second opinion before we take that step."*



SECTION 2

STEPS FOR PROACTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Some Additional Tips For Difficult Conversations

(From Research By John Gottman)

- **Soft Startup.** Open the conversation with a compliment, something you admire about the other person, or by acknowledging you are going to share something difficult.
- **Be Polite and Appreciative.** Even if you are “arguing” avoid blaming, name calling, or harsh language. Soften your tone of voice, find a point of connection, acknowledge your partner’s strengths.
- **Make Repairs.** If you say something harsh, acknowledge that and start over, “I’m sorry I know what I said was really mean. Can I take it back? Let me start over.”
- **De-escalate.** If things are getting heated, or you are having trouble controlling your emotions ask to take a break. Take deep breaths, or – if you can without sarcasm – use humor to defuse.
- **Remember** – Difficult conversations and even occasional arguing is normal. Practice ways to repair, sooth yourself, sooth your partner, and hear each other during difficult conversations.



SECTION 3

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Conversations Starters and Tips for Couples (App)

[GET THE APP](#)

10 Steps to Effective Listening (Article)

[READ NOW](#)

Communication With Family (CDMS Webinar)

[WATCH NOW](#)

The Art of Communication (Webinar)

[WATCH NOW](#)

Communicating With Family: Tips and Strategies (Article)

[READ NOW](#)

Making the Most of Your Healthcare Provider Visits (Website)

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)

STEP (Solutions To Empower People) Program™

[VIEW PROGRAM](#)

Understanding Your Healthcare Team (Handout)

[READ NOW](#)

To help with communication of your kids consider the book series:

How to Talk so Kids Will Listen



AN EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE GUIDE AND RESOURCE

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