

Your Relationship Toolbox

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All these skills can be used in any relationship: romantic partners, parent to child, with friends, family, or co-workers. They all help with building a strong relationship, maintaining it, and repairing it as needed.

Build a Strong Foundation:

Mutual Respect: The "container" for a strong relationship includes mutual respect, trust, a shared belief that you have each other's best interests at heart, and a commitment to the relationship.

Love Maps: Gottman says building a Love Map means getting to know the other person deeply. What life experiences shaped them into the person they are today? What are their hopes and dreams for the future? What worries them? What is something new that they want to learn how to do? What are the names of their co-workers / fellow students at school? What projects are they working on? What is their favorite type of ice cream? Knowing those things helps you to know this person. Continuing to ask questions tells them you care about what's important to them.

Love Languages: In Chapman's Five Love Languages, he argues that different people have different "languages" they use to express love, and that we "hear" love best when it's spoken in our language. Which one of these sounds most like how your partner or loved one hears love from you? Which describes how you hear love? What do you speak?

- *Physical Touch:* Feels most loved when being touched. Feels most rejected if touch is absent/ unkind.
- *Words of Affirmation:* Drinks in encouragement, praise, validation for concerns. Sensitive to criticism.
- *Acts of Service:* Wants active support with concrete tasks. Feels unsupported when you don't pitch in.
- *Gifts:* Loves any special little thing done just for them. Will be upset if you skip a gift-giving occasion.
- *Quality Time:* Wants your Presence - time together, spent talking and connecting, doing activities together. Feels unsupported if you're off buying gifts or doing tasks instead of spending time together.

Discuss this with your loved one. Are you right about what their language is? What do they think is your love language? Sometimes partners discover that if one is feeling unloved, it's not that the other person wasn't trying hard to communicate love, they may have just been shouting a lot in the wrong language.

Nurture the Relationship:

Express Appreciation: One of the best ways to re-fill our love tanks is by creating a “culture of appreciation”. Some ideas: Thank people for the things they have done. Even if they’re part of their “job.” When asking someone to do something, make it a real question, not an order disguised as a question. (And say please!) Write thank you notes and hide them to be found at a later date. Give them a card with sweet words.

Turn Toward Your Loved One: (based on Gottman). When someone wants to make a connection, they make “bids for affection”: questions, invitations, glances, or touch. There are three ways to respond.

Turn Toward: Act in a responsive, interested, positive, and loving way. Reach out, touch them, look at them, smile. Say “I hear you”, “I want to connect with you,” “I’m interested in you.” Ask a question.

Turn Away: Act in a way that ignores them, or dismisses their bid. Look away, wander away. Don’t respond verbally, or respond in a way that has nothing to do with what they said.

Turn Against: Act in an angry way that rejects them and their bid. Walk away, glare, make aggressive movements. Use sarcasm or put-downs, roll your eyes. Do the opposite of what they asked you to do.

We all have moments of turning away or against. But the more positive bids and more turning towards, the better!

Spend Quality Time Together: Spending time with someone one-on-one where you intentionally focus on each other and on strengthening your relationship is powerful. Weekly dates with your partner, or monthly gatherings with friends are important, but so are everyday moments —when you separate, spend 2 minutes saying goodbye. When you reunite, spend some time talking about your days before going on to other tasks. Express appreciation and affection to each other. If you have limited time together, remember their love language and prioritize.

Repair as Needed:

Accept Responsibility: There are two parties in every conflict. Before talking to a partner or colleague about an issue, spend time reflecting on what role you may have in it. You may also exercise empathy to consider possible reasons for the other person’s behavior. Are there other interpretations than your first impression?

When You... I Feel... I wish... This tool is a combination of ideas from Honest, Direct, Respectful by Dennis Adams and Marshall Rosenberg’s Non-Violent Communication (www.cnvc.org)

“When you....” Identify the behavior: The more concrete and specific, the better. Do not introduce any judgment or evaluation. Is this something you can feel in your body? See with my eyes? Hear?

“I feel...” Identify the feeling: State the emotion - “I feel sad... or angry... or powerless...” Be careful not to say “I feel like you are.... ” and jump into your interpretation of their intent, not how *you feel* because of their *behavior*.

“I need...” Identify a core need: This statement may not always feel necessary. But often underneath a feeling there is a fundamental need that is unmet. Do you need to feel respected? Safe? In control? Nurtured? Trusted?

Request: Identify something you want, wish, or wonder.

- “I want” tells them what action you want (and expect) them to take. Be as specific as you can, and make sure it’s something that is possible for them to do. Sometimes your partner says no to this request. Explore other approaches to getting this need met.
- “I wish” says what you would like to happen, without saying they have to do it for you.
- “I wonder” is a continuation of your feeling statement – it’s an attempt to understand their perspective rather than trying to create your own interpretation.

Move Forward Together:

Speak of “We” More than “Me.” If you listen to people in conflict, you’ll hear a lot of me vs. you language: “You never...” and “I always” and “why can’t you just...” Try speaking more often of “us”, “we”, and “our goals” and less often about “I, me, and my plans.” Couples who mostly use inclusive pronouns like “we,” “our” and “us” tend to have healthier, happier, and longer relationships. Even when they are in conflict, they have lower blood pressure and lower heart rates than those who talk of “me.” Their facial expressions, tone of voice and body language are all more positive. The couple’s use of “we” language helps to foster a sense of connection, interdependence, and shared values and goals. Just changing your language reminds you of your partnership.

Sources for More Information

These skills are covered in depth on www.GoodDaysWithKids.com. Other helpful sources: Louden’s [Couples Comfort Book](#), Hendricks’ [Conscious Heart](#); Gottman’s [Baby Makes Three](#), Chapman’s [Five Love Languages](#), Marshall Rosenberg’s Center for Non-Violent Communication, www.cnvc.org and [“We Talk” is Linked to Healthier Relationships](#) in Psychology Today.