

# Introduction to Couple's Therapy Communication Exercises

## *Various Exercises that can be used in Couple's Therapy – An Overview of Available Tools*

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### Introduction

Below is a summary of the couples'-based exercises that we have created in *MARET* to be used in conjunction with the *MARET Counseling and Assessment Software* package. While you will not find reference to these exercises within the context of printed materials from the software package, you may choose to use some or all of these exercises during your therapy sessions with couples.

Often, communication is an area that needs to be reconstructed substantially in any relationship. When couples enter therapy it is likely that one or both will score substantially low on the communications skills area of the *Marriage Inventory* or the *Premarriage Inventory*.

These exercises are designed to give couples specific skills that they may be lacking. There is a specific focus for each of these tools and a specific lesson to be learned from each of the exercises. It is recommended that the therapist continues to use any given exercise until it reaches its effectiveness and can be performed without intervention from the therapist.

How does a therapist, a counselor, or a pastor know when the specific exercise has reached its effectiveness? A specific exercise has reached its effectiveness when the therapist can "test" the couple under ordinary communications methods and the improper methods of communication that brought about the need for the special exercise are gone.

These exercises have been designed to help correct specific problems in interpersonal communication. Therefore, the therapist may choose to use some of these techniques even if there appears to be no communications problems. These exercises are all designed to help communication skill-building among couples that already seem to be communicating rather well. Using these exercises will only enhance their communications abilities. Couples should be encouraged to use these techniques from time to time at home to maintain their communications skills.

Finally, it is quite possible and very useful, actually, if a therapist combines two or more of these exercises at the same time. You do not need to use them one at a time. Feel free to be creative and use more than one exercise at a time.

A summary of each of the communication skill building exercises will be presented below. You may find the actual communications skill documents under the *Forms* heading on the *MARET Premium Services* website.

## **Emotional Expressions Workbook**

The *Emotional Expressions Workbook* is a *Workbook* designed to be filled out by each individual in the couple. The purpose for the *Workbook* is to sharpen skills associated with communicating exact issues that are of concern to one or both of the individuals.

In this exercise, the couple learns to communicate without using inappropriate words. The individuals are encouraged to express their needs without using verbiage that consciously or unconsciously attacks the other person. Thus, there are certain words that are “off limits” in this exercise and the individuals need to learn to communicate with their significant other without using those words.

Rather than continuing to blame the other person for conflict in the relationship, the individuals learn to express their own feelings, to express those feelings related to a specific incident, and to come to a proposed resolution for those incidents all without blaming or even naming the significant other. All of the focus is on the speaker – not on the other individual.

This is an exercise that every single couple should master. In more cases than not, the therapist will want to use this exercise to “test” the communication abilities of every couple that enters their office.

## **Back Up a Minute Exercise**

We have all learned the importance of body language. Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad, but if individuals are facing each other in a room everyone involved in a conversation is communicating something with their posture – the position of their arms, their legs, whether or not they are sitting up or slouching down, how they are using their hands, facial expressions, and so on.

When a couple is attempting to communicate in a relationship, body language can say more than words ever will. A pointed finger is always a threat. Crossed arms means that the person has closed down communication lines or is cowering under too much pressure. A stern look on the face is a threat to many people and will cause them to make concessions that they might not want to make.

All of these are extra added “bonuses” that we need to deal with when we are attempting to get a couple whose communications skills are not up to par. The bonus, however, is usually negative. The body language exhibited by the leader of the couple will often subtly force the other individual to say or even do things that they would not wish to do.

So, why don’t we eliminate body language from the communication picture altogether? That should somewhat “level” the playing field so that the individual who is the “underdog” in the communications race will have a little more of an advantage. Now they are no longer threatened by the shaking fist, or the flailing hands, or the stern and mean grimace on the face of the bully-gone-wild.

How do we propose to eliminate body language as an effective means of negative communication? We propose to do so by making the communicating couple sit back-to-back. This exercise will teach the therapist how to position the couple in a manner that body language is turned off completely. This may be a very effective tool – especially if it is combined with other exercises.

When the case is substantial and one individual appears to have complete communicative control over the other, then there is a possibility that the combination of *Back Up a Minute*, *Two Minute Talk*, and *Fifteen-Second Break* combined together will effectively shut down the bully and allow the other person the time they need to talk. Oh, maybe you should throw in the *Emotional Expressions Workbook* as a final kicker. That should completely finish off the bully....

## **Two Minute Talk Exercise**

When you listen to the communication of a couple, usually you will find one individual who sits quietly and listens. The other individual is the “yapper” – they never shut up. Yap, yap, yap. They must be assured that you as a therapist know that they are there. They must know that you understand their viewpoints. They must speak in such a manner so as to let you know they are right (not all of the time, but mostly).

Communication cannot exist if it is not mutual. That means allowing each individual to get out what they need to get out without the other person “flooding” the conversation with their own stuff. That is hard to do in most cases.

However, we have designed an exercise that will allow equal opportunity for discussion – whether the yapper likes it or not. A word of warning to the therapist: This one is usually hard to enforce since the yapper will always try to stretch out their allotted time to talk. “*Just a minute...I’m almost done...Give me a few more seconds...Oh, this isn’t fair!*” That’s what you should be prepared for. I can almost guarantee that you will hear it, if you have a yapper in the crowd.

This exercise allows each individual to talk for a timed period of two minutes only. After the two minutes, they are done and the other person takes the floor for their allotted two-minute period of time. The therapist must ensure that neither person under any circumstances is disrupted by the “listener.” If there is a disruption, the speaker’s time starts over. During the talking time of the current speaker, the listener can engage in only one of two activities – they are the only two activities allowed: They must either be writing or their hands must be folded in their lap.

Furthermore, if the listener uses any other methods of disruption associated with body language (speaking, shaking their head, grunting, moaning, rolling their eyes, etc), the therapist should stop the clock and allow the speaker to start over. No interruptions are allowed during speaking time – none. The options are writing or folded hands. That’s it.

## **Fifteen-Second Timeout Exercise**

Sometimes when you are dealing with a situation where at least one of the individuals is highly aggressive, you will find that as soon as they are allowed to talk they will begin speaking. Usually, they do so without thinking, but nevertheless, they begin speaking.

When this happens you may wish to use the *Fifteen-Second Timeout Rule*. That means that when one person stops speaking, the other person must wait at least fifteen seconds before they can begin speaking. This presents an artificial barrier against the aggressiveness of the speaker. They must wait. If they choose not to wait until the fifteen seconds have transpired, they forfeit their right to speak and the speaking then is transferred back to the other person.

This exercise is great to use in conjunction with all of the other exercises but especially with the *Two Minute Talk* exercise. Also, you may plug it in to the *Back Up a Minute* exercise.

## Written Exercises

Writing is often a good “buffer” when verbal communication is totally broken down. This technique, however, has its drawbacks. It is easy for the aggressive person to write in a manner that is caustic and destructive to the whole communication process. The aggressive and angry individual will use the writing time to list every negative that they can find against the other person.

It would be beneficial for the therapist to provide a buffer zone in these writing exercises. Allow a certain period of time for each individual to write on a specific topic – a topic that contains a conflict.

After the writing time is over, the therapist should read each statement to determine if the writing is constructive or not. If it is not constructive, then the individual who has violated the non-constructive writing rule should be forced to rewrite their statement from a more positive angle. If they are not able, then maybe it is time for some one-on-one time with that individual.

Once the couple has matured to the point where they can write constructively, this is a great exercise that they can perform at home when discussions may be too heated to communicate face-to-face.