

Communicating About What You *Really* Need

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Sometimes in relationships, we feel like our needs aren't being met. Sometimes it's because our partner isn't aware of what those needs are. (Sometimes we ourselves don't know what we need! We just know that something important is missing, or something is going wrong.)

One way to pinpoint unmet needs is to look for recurrent conflicts and chronic complaints. Think about statements you make which start with "you always," "you never", "why can't you", and "why don't you." When you've collected a list of complaints, get a clean piece of paper. First, for each of the complaints, try to think if there is something related to it that your partner *is* doing well that you could give them a little appreciation for. Then, transform a complaint into a simple statement about what you need. Use these four steps to detail what you are:

- Observing. Observe what is actually happening.
 - Do not introduce any judgment or evaluation.
 - An easy way to check if this is an "unarguable truth" is to ask: is this something I can feel in my body? See with my eyes? Hear? Would everyone else be able to see the same thing I can "see" right now? Would a video camera see it?
- Feeling. Identify the *core* feeling this thing brings up for you.
 - Anger? Fear? Sadness?
 - Those are the core emotions, and most things come down to that. If you want to use other more specific words, like outraged, terrified, or bummed out, that's fine. But try not to bring judgments into your description of your feelings. For example, saying you feel "victimized" implies that the other person meant to victimize you...
 - Take responsibility for feeling that way. (We can not control other people's actions... we *can* and do make choices about how we respond to them.)
- Needing. Find a need behind that feeling.
 - Don't think yet about concrete actions, think about basic fundamental needs: do you need to feel respected? Valued? Safe? In control? Nurtured? Trusted?
- Requesting. Formulate a request based on your observations, feelings, and needs.
 - Make your request as specific as you can. And make sure it is something that would be possible for your partner to do.
 - Avoid demands, where they must do as you say, *or else* (or else you'll blame them, judge them, lay a guilt trip). The goal is loving cooperation, not forced compliance.
 - They can respond to your request by doing it, or it's acceptable for them to respond by stating something that they observe, feel, need, and request.

An example: The Complaint - "You *never* think to check if the baby's diaper needs to be changed. You *always* expect me to keep track of it."

Appreciation: "I appreciate that whenever I do ask you to change a diaper, you do so willingly."

Observing: "While we were together for the whole day on Saturday, I didn't see you ever check the baby's diaper to see if he *needed* changing."

Feeling: "I sometimes feel angry, or overburdened, when I feel like I'm the only one who takes the responsibility for keeping track of the baby's needs."

Needing: "I need to feel like I have support from you in remembering all the responsibilities of parenting, not just help with assigned tasks."

Requesting: "This week, when we're all together, could you be the one who checks the baby's diaper? I am happy to change it, I just don't want to be responsible for keeping track of things all the time."

Ideas from Jennifer Louden's [Couples Comfort Book](#), Marshall Rosenberg's Center for Non-Violent Communication, www.cnvc.org, Kathryn and Gay Hendricks' [Conscious Heart](#), and Harville Hendrix, [Getting the Love you Want](#).