

Stepcoupling and the Hope Couples Approach Workbook

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This Workbook refers to two books:

*Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family* by
Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green

And

*Couple Therapy: A New Hope-Focused Approach* by
Jennifer S. Ripley and Everett L. Worthington Jr.

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#

# Introduction

*Stepcoupling*. This fun phrase comes from the *Stepcoupling* book and refers to the situation where adults are seeking to build healthy casual or serious romantic relationships while combining existing families.

During the 1990s, the attention on stepfamilies increased as they crossed the cultural barrier of private life into mainstream books, movies, and television. Also, in the mid 1990s, 1 in 3 Americans identified as a stepparent, stepchild, stepsibling, or a member of a stepfamily. With the increased attention came increased scrutiny and stressors.

New couple stressors: Stepcouple stressors:

\* Children \* New couple stressors

\* Careers \* Children (his, hers, theirs, both)

\* Aging parents \* Financing multiple households

\* Personal health \* Custody and legal issues

\* Household responsibilities \* Biological parent influences

 \* Value conflicts

 \* Tight budgets

 \* Parenting obligations/conflicts

 \* Ex-spouses

The key to a successful remarriage, blended family, and stepcouple? The quality and strength of the stepcouple’s relationship and how willing and able each partner is in navigating personal and family issues.

**Why?** The stepcouple relationship forms the foundation that ensures the couple can weather any storm.

**How?** It is not a one-fix-and-done recipe for success. The foundation should be strengthened daily by both partners by committing to “us” being of vital importance.

\* Make love \* Share stories

\* Resolve conflict \* Laugh at private jokes

\* Give undivided attention \* Dream about the future

\* Finding adventure in the mundane with your partner

# Before Stepcoupling: What Now?

Most, if not all, of those who are coming to therapy are at least a little bit past getting ready for a new relationship. But what is recommended for a successful start to a new relationship?

***Regrouping and Reconnecting with yourself.***

This is a good place to start.

*How do I regroup and reconnect with myself?*

* Grieve the loss of a marriage.

It doesn’t matter if the marriage ended amicably or negatively, or was your decision or their decision. The marriage happened and was a part of your life for a period of time. Allow yourself the time and space to feel your feelings and grieve for the loss of what was and what could have been. Remember that like “normal” grief, it is not linear. Grief can look like the 5 stages of grief, but may present as the 15 stages of grief with anger part 2 and denial part 3. Everyone grieves differently and in their own time.

* Renegotiate a new relationship with your ex-spouse.

It’s important to know what the new relationship is going to look like with your ex-spouse. Do you still want to attend their birthday parties and family Christmas parties and Thanksgiving dinners? Will they still do your taxes? Will you still mow their lawn? Will they help you pay off your credit cards? It’s important to know where the boundaries of your relationship are so that you can sever some of the emotional ties from your previous partner. You are not married anymore; why act like you still are?

* Take inventory of the previous marriage.

It’s easy to come up with all the negative things or things that went wrong in a marriage following a divorce. That’s normal - big emotions like anger, hurt, disappointment, sorrow, rejection, and failure are competing for your attention. It’s also important to be able to identify the good, positive aspects of your previous marriage. This allows you to clarify to yourself what you’re looking for in a partner and a new relationship and what are your “deal breakers.”

* Get to know yourself again.

People are not static; we are constantly changing and growing based on the events and environments we encounter. The person you were at the start of your marriage may not be the same person you are right now. Maybe you cook better, maybe you developed a habit of going running every morning when previously you would sleep in, maybe now you’re somewhat obsessed with HGTV, and maybe you realize that leaving crumbs on the counter makes you want to scream. Take some time to get to know yourself again: your likes and dislikes, needs, goals, strengths and weaknesses, and relationship patterns and your role in creating them. Figure out who you are.

* Figure out what influenced your role and preferences.

Your interpersonal development starts at a very young age. You learn from your family and friends about how to respond to your environments and develop your own interpersonal style. This information can carry over into adulthood and play out in your relationships. Some childhood interpersonal experiences make it hard to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Not all experiences are good.

By processing and diffusing those big feelings that arise following a divorce, you are better able to face those hard tasks of grieving the loss of the marriage and renegotiating your relationship with your previous spouse. Allowing yourself to reflect on those positive parts of your previous relationship and what did not work well for you can be a freeing experience that allows you to say good-bye and move on. Avoid ruminating on the shoulds, coulds, and woulds that perpetuate your emotional tie to your ex. The process of renegotiating a relationship can facilitate a change in bond from a married couple to a businesslike co-parent relationship with courtesy, respect, cooperation, and a shared commitment to the best interest of the children.

***Ask yourself:***

* What am I still holding on to from my previous marriage that may make it hard for me to move on? (*Am I still angry? Do I want them to take me back? Am I waiting for an apology?*)

Utilizing [forbearance](#_qyzes5ndxppq) to help identify those areas and encourage acceptance of unchangeable previous marriage problems can lay the groundwork for a more positive beginning to a new relationship. It can also help couples to forgive the relationship hurts from the past in order to focus on mediating the problems of the present.
* What do I want my relationship with my ex-spouse to look like? (*What is okay for us and what isn’t? What will we still do with/for each other? Do I want to know about them moving on or not? Do I want them to have a role in my life currently?*)
* What went well in my previous marriage that I want to look for or establish in my new relationships? What didn’t I like in my previous marriage that I will put limits on or avoid in my new relationships?

A good way to assess what is really important to you is to complete the [Psychological Needs Card Sort](#_7phe33ytkkg6). Printed on each of the cards is a common “need” that partners may value in a relationship. This includes things like “acceptance, the need for approval” that refers to the desire of having your partner to approve of you and “romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex” that refers specifically to sexual intimacy.

What needs made the cut for the “Necessary” pile and why? What life experiences led to that decision? How do you express these needs? How do you know when they are/aren’t being met?

* Who am I now?

*What makes me happy? Sad? Angry?*

*What energizes me? What saps my energy?*

*How comfortable am I with change?*

*How patient am I? Am I easily frustrated?*

*What type of people am I drawn to? What type of people repel me? What kind of people do I attract? What type of people do I feel most comfortable with?*

*How wide are my mood swings?*

*Do I feel very strongly that things should be done in certain ways? Am I open to other people’s ways of doing things?*

*When I’m troubled, how do I prefer to work things through: alone or with others?*

*List 5 qualities you like about yourself - and be honest.*

*List 5 qualities you don’t like about yourself - and be very honest.*

* What are my values?
	+ **Education:**

*When I was a child, did I like school? Was it easy or hard?*

*How important did I think school and schoolwork was?*

*How important did my parents think they were?*

*Did I do my schoolwork regularly? What, if anything, happened if I didn’t? How did I feel about homework?*

*What kind of support did I need from my parents for my schoolwork? Did I get it?*

*What happened when I did a particularly good job on my schoolwork? How did I feel?*

*Did gender or birth order play a role in how the children in my family were treated about schoolwork?*

*Did my parents graduate high school? College? Graduate or professional school? How did that impact me?*

*What message did I receive from my friends and the larger culture about the importance of grades and education? What did I learn in my first marriage?*

* + **Achievement:**

*How important was achievement in my childhood home?*

*Did I receive any awards or recognition as a child? How did my parents respond? Were they disappointed if or when I didn’t receive any when other children did?*

*Was my family competitive? Did some children achieve more than others? Were they treated differently from the less successful siblings?*

*As a child, was I aware of any job-related achievements or disappointments that my parents experienced? How did I learn about them? How did my parents respond?*

*When and how did my parents express pride in their children? When and how did I express disappointment?*

*Do I remember anyone in my family cheating? In games or sports? School? Income taxes? Relationships? What, if anything, happened as a result?*

*Did I cheat as a child? What happened as a result?*

*Do I think my parents would have agreed with the statement that “the ends justify the means?”*

*What experiences after my childhood influence the way I feel about achievement? About integrity?*

* + **Honesty:**

*As a child, when did I lie and why? How did I lie - by not telling the whole truth or fabricating falsehoods? How did I feel when I lied?*

*Did I get away with lying? How did my parents respond?*

*Was I ever aware that one or both of my parents were lying? To whom were they lying? Someone outside the home? Me? Themselves? How often did this happen?*

*Sometimes parents ask their children to lie for them. Was I ever asked to do this?*

*Were there certain situations in which lying was acceptable? Were “little white lies” acceptable?*

*What experiences after childhood influenced my values about honesty? Was honesty an issue in my previous marriage?*

*What message did or do I receive from the larger culture about lying? Do I think it’s culturally acceptable to lie?*

* + **Parenting:**

*How important was child-rearing to my parents?*

*Were they active parents or did they only get involved when they had to?*

*How did they value their relationship relative to their parenting responsibilities? Did they travel or go out as a couple frequently? Rarely? Were they more available to each other or to the children?*

*What do I remember hearing about parenting and being in an adult romantic relationship from my parents?*

*What experiences after childhood influenced the relative importance I place on coupling and child-rearing? Was one more important than the other in my first marriage?*

*As a child, did I know any childless adults?*

*Were they single? What were their lives like? Did I know any mothers who had significant interests/activities apart from child-rearing? Did I know any fathers who were the primary caregivers of their children?*

*If both of my parents worked, who stayed home with me if I was sick? How was it decided?*

*When I was a child, who did I admire as a parent? Was there a couple that I admired?*

*When I was a child, what did I fantasize about being an adult? Did I imagine my primary role as a parent or a partner or both?*

* What made me who I am today?

*As a child, did I feel loved, valued, and respected?*

*What was it like to be a boy in my family? What was it like to be a girl in my family?*

*What was my role in my childhood home? Caretaker? Peacemaker? Scapegoat? Good child? Troublemaker? Clown? Baby?*

*Who had the most power in my childhood home? Who had the least?*

*How did my family handle disagreements? Did my family fight openly, discuss conflict, or hide it? How did I handle my emotions as a child?*

*What did I learn about how to handle money? What did I learn about sex? About the specific gender roles of men and women? About alcohol and smoking and other drugs? About relationships?*

*What was my parents’ marriage like? Intimate? Distant? Affectionate? Hostile? Mutually supportive?*

*Did my parents stay married to each other or were there divorces and remarriages? What were my expectations for marriage based on my family history?*

*Did I experience stepfamily life as a child? Did I get along with and respect my stepparent(s)? Did s/he respect me?*

*What kind of relationship did we have? Affectionate? Hostile? Supportive? Competitive? Distant? Combative?*

*Did I have stepsiblings? Did I get along with them?*

*What were my parents like as parents? Loving? Controlling and authoritarian? Empathetic? Physically and emotionally available? Aloof? Permissive? Absent?*

*How did I know I was in trouble as a child? Was I disciplined?*

These questions are important to explore, because your past experiences influence your present. By diving into your [Family of Origin](#_m0jclilmuwcb) (as in your personal and family relationship history and dynamics), you are able to explore the patterns of hurt from your childhood and observe how they play out in your current relationship. This exploration is meant to increase spouse’s understanding of each other in order to improve their bond, reduce defensiveness, and increase their ability to provide empathetic support.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Forbearance

Psychological Needs Card Sort

Family of Origin

# Starting to Date

So you’re ready to get back out there - great! But you should still be cautious. It is still possible to create a dysfunctional relationship at any age or stage in life.

How do I know if this new relationship is worth the time and energy?

***Ask yourself:***

* Is this relationship right for me?
	+ *Does my partner respect me?*
	+ *Does he or she listen to me?*
	+ *Can I be honest?*
	+ *Can I show my real feelings and share my thoughts? Can I be me?*
	+ *Can I rely on my partner?*
	+ *Can I grow and change in this relationship?*
	+ *Am I able to reach my own goals within this relationship?*
	+ *Is my partner willing and able to help me?*
* Does this relationship work for the two of us?
	+ *Are both of our needs being met?*
	+ *Are we kind to each other?*
	+ *Do I listen to my partner?*
	+ *Do we include each other in our lives?*
	+ *Can we be equal partners?*
	+ *Do we have fun together? Do we share common interests and values?*
	+ *How well do we resolve conflict together?*
	+ *Are we both willing to compromise?*
	+ *Are we friends? Can my partner count on me?*
	+ *Is there room for my partner to grow and change?*
	+ *Am I willing and able to help my partner?*
* What is right for the children?
	+ *Am I willing to be a stepparent? Is my partner?*
	+ *Can I accept my partner’s children?*
	+ *Can my partner trust me with his or her children? Can I trust my partner with my children?*
	+ *Can I respect my partner’s relationship with his or her children? Does he or she respect my relationship with my children?*
	+ *Am I patient with his or her children? Do I honor them as individuals? Is my partner patient with my children? Does he or she honor them as individuals?*
	+ *Do we have similar parenting styles? If not, can we resolve our differences?*
	+ *Do we have similar expectations for our children?*
* How do I feel about being in a stepfamily?
	+ *What went on in my childhood home that meant “family” to me? Who was present? What activities was I engaged in?*
	+ *As a child, was I in a stepfamily or did I know anyone in a stepfamily? What did I learn about stepfamilies?*
	+ *Did my parents know anyone who was in a stepfamily? What did I learn about stepfamilies from my parents?*
	+ *What experiences after childhood helped shape my values about families and stepfamilies?*
	+ *Was I part of a stepcouple before this marriage? How was that experience for me?*
* Am I glossing over problems and red flags?

Don’t be tempted; pay attention! Look for patterns in your current and previous relationships.

# ~~Speed~~ Limits and Boundaries

When entering into a new relationship, it’s also important to assess what your boundaries and limits are.

Everyone has their own unspoken rules about what is “my space,” “your space,” what is okay, and what isn’t okay. You tend to feel most comfortable when your rules are in sync with those around you. These expectations are based on your previous experiences with other people: family, friends, colleagues, roommates, etc. There aren’t any right or wrong boundaries with the exception of abusive, emotional, or physical intrusion. However, conflict can arise when people have different needs for physical and emotional space and don’t understand or accept the needs of others.

Why are stepfamilies particularly vulnerable to boundary issues?

* *Everyone has a different idea of family.* In a typical nuclear family, whether you love them or hate them, they are kin and grace is more likely to be extended to their family. However, in a stepfamily, those close biological ties extend beyond the household when they have a parent that lives elsewhere or when a child bounces back and forth between households. One partner may only accept their own children or a child could refuse to acknowledge a new stepparent.
* *Boundary crossings can happen.* As you are establishing this new blended family within a home, physical boundaries can exist and cause conflict. Some examples include conflicts over what a closed door means, which areas of the house are off-limits to others, if laundry loads can be mixed between family members, and which stages of undress are inappropriate for common areas. Emotional boundaries are more challenging because of their inherent nuances and the subtlety.
* *Ambiguity can cause stress.* The absence of clearly defined physical and emotional spaces makes boundary crossings more likely. Shaping boundaries is the process of establishing and maintaining physical and emotional space for members of the stepfamily, stepcouple relationship, and the whole stepfamily. Healthy stepfamilies establish consistent, sturdy boundaries that are sensitive to the nuances and complexities of each unique stepfamily, but they take time to develop.
* *Children can be threatened by new adult relationships.* In a remarriage, someone new and in charge is added to the family, which can be threatening to children. Scheduling special one-on-one time with their biological parent can reassure the child of their importance. During this time, it is critical that promises are kept because during this time, children are vulnerable to the fear that they are unimportant. When you schedule a time with your child, you show them that they are just as important as the rest of your calendar. Stepparents who support the alone time between a biological parent and their child sends the message that they accept and value their relationship.

***So what do we do?***

1. **Recognize the feeling. -** The best way to gauge if there has been a boundary violation is how you feel. Check in with yourself; what is happening internally? Are you angry? Irritated? Anxious? Unperturbed? Figuring out what your emotional response is to boundary violations can help to identify when an event in the future has crossed a personal boundary.
2. **Conflict ≠ someone is wrong. -** We can’t expect a new stepfamily to know each other’s boundaries off the bat because not everyone has the same personal boundaries. This often results in boundary violations. Labeling your needs for physical and emotional space clarifies ambiguous personal limits and reduces the likelihood of it occurring again.
3. **Sooner is better. -** When a boundary violation happens, it is better to address the issue sooner rather than later by openly discussing the differences. When issues go unspoken, they grow in power exponentially until considering someone else’s position is next-to-impossible. Additionally, the sooner the boundary violation is addressed, the higher the relative relevancy is to both parties. If a boundary violation occurs on Monday, but doesn’t get addressed until Saturday, the relative relevancy decreases exponentially.
4. **Be flexible and inclusive. -** By practicing flexibility and inclusivity, you model adaptability to your children. In a stepfamily, everyone has to stretch their comfort zones to accommodate new people and new ways of doing things. When members of a stepfamily allow their boundaries to expand, it allows the stepfamily to grow together.
5. **Refuse chronic rage. -** The desire to vent and seek validation when upset is natural. However, your anger towards an ex-spouse won’t make a bit of difference in changing their behavior, but it can negatively affect your stepcouple relationship and your family. When all your energy is directed towards your ex-spouse, energy is diverted from the stepfamily and stepcouple relationship. Setting a firm emotional boundary keeps a sabotaging ex-spouse from infiltrating your personal emotional space.

Boundaries are also important when navigating relationships and interactions with former spouses. When boundary violations by former spouses occur, it can cause strain on the stepcouple relationship.

* **Boundary Violation:** Former spouses enter each other’s homes at will.
**Effect:** New spouses can feel uncomfortable or irritated about the lack of respect for the stepcouple’s home and the distinction between “our space” and “ex-spouse’s space.”
	+ **Possible solutions:** Set boundaries as a couple about appropriate and inappropriate times to visit, request that spouses be invited in instead of entering freely, or plan an approximate schedule for when ex-spouses can visit or will be visited. Allowing for more boundaries and predictability allows partners to be aware and prepared when former spouses will be in their homes.
* **Boundary Violation:** Former spouses call the stepcouple frequently about the children.
**Effect:** The opportunity for new spouses to establish a strong stepparent-stepchild relationship is inhibited by the contact. This frequent contact can also make the former partners become an invisible 3rd parent that has entered the marriage and the conflict of that added dynamic may create distance between the partners of the stepcouple.
	+ **Possible solutions:** There are appropriate reasons for former spouses to talk regularly with each other: school problems, dating, driving, curfews, consistent punishment, etc. However, these former spouses are also capable of handling day-to-day discipline and care without consulting their former spouse. The former spouse is no longer a part of your home’s parenting team and their role should transition into the role of a co-parent.
	+ **Possible solutions:** Some people do not like relinquishing their control. If a former partner calls often, they may have difficulty relinquishing complete control over your children’s lives or loosening their emotional ties. The former partner may not have moved on yet and is waiting for an opportunity to reconnect. To prevent this emotional tie from continuing, it is important to set an appropriate boundary that can help nurture the stepcouple bond.
	+ **Possible solutions:** Maybe you’re not quite willing to let go yet. What do you think is the reason why you are so willing to entertain your former partner’s frequent calls? Your former partner cannot intrude on your relationship unless you allow it. The unclear boundary can often represent unfinished work from the divorce and prevent a healthy and positive new marriage from developing.
* **Boundary Violation:** A partner does anything their former spouse asks, even if it is inconvenient for them or the family.
**Effect:** Current spouses feel estranged or jealous or angry or frustrated.
	+ **Possible solutions:** There are also as many reasons why a person has difficulty setting boundaries as there are people. Sometimes, identifying and acknowledging the emotional reasons for continuing a tie can begin the process of loosening the tie. Guilt can encourage former partners to jump through hoops to apologize for their role in their marriage ending. As a biological parent, it is your responsibility to emotionally separate yourself from your spouse to allow space for your new partner to join you in co-parenting in the home and to move your ex-spouse out of a place of power in your home.
* **Boundary Violation:** A partner often complains about the negative qualities of their ex-spouse and plots ways to exact revenge on them.
**Effect:** Although the ex-spouse isn’t there physically, they take up a part of your life and attention emotionally. They demand a clear presence in your home and relationship and by constantly complaining about your ex-spouse, you give them the space. The space that they are given takes away from your ability to be present with your children and your current spouse.
	+ **Possible solutions:** Turn your attention away from your ex-spouse and towards the children in your home and the stepcouple relationship. Acknowledge the presence and value of having both biological parents in a child’s life and honor the boundary encircling the first family. Avoid maligning with the absent parent, even if it’s tempting; your children are half you and half of your ex-spouse. By bad-mouthing your ex, you are bad-mouthing a part of your children. Allow your children to have a relationship with their parent if they want it; they can find out as they grow the good and bad parts of that parent.

# The Value of Values

Your expectations on how your home ought to be run is often based on values that have developed throughout your lifetime. Subtle and overt messages about what mattered in your childhood home, gender and sibling position, familial social class, ethnic background, religious beliefs, and the larger cultural environment influenced how and what values developed. Values represent whatever you feel is right and important and each individual unconsciously assigns various degrees of importance to each value. It is important to note the difference between beliefs and values: beliefs live in the brain, values in the viscera and gut. When you act in alignment with your values, it feels right and familiar; when you act against your values, it feels wrong and can cause uneasiness or anxiety.

When you stepcouple, there’s no grace period - repartnering means that *everything* comes together including adults, kids, pets, mortgages, ex-spouses, debt, etc. There is no grace period of repartnering without children to allow space for you to adjust to a value conflict. Values can include but aren’t limited to:

**Love Respect Success Religion**

**Popularity Integrity Hard Work Generosity**

**Traditional Family Values Justice Loyalty**

Figuring out your values and your partner’s values can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate. A good way to assess what is really important to you is to complete the [Psychological Needs Card Sort](#_7phe33ytkkg6). Printed on each of the cards is a common “need” that partners may value in a relationship. This includes things like “acceptance, the need for approval” that refers to the desire of having your partner to approve of you and “romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex” that refers specifically to sexual intimacy. After sorting, ask yourselves:

*Where do you have similarities? Differences?*

*Why did the needs you chose make the cut for the “Necessary” pile?*

*What life experiences led to those needs becoming important?*

*How do you express these needs?*

*How do you know when they are/aren’t being met?*

*Were these met in a previous relationship? How did it feel when they were/weren’t?*

*What does it mean for you/your relationship if your partner didn’t rate their needs similarly to yours?*

It can also be helpful to explore your [Family of Origin](#_m0jclilmuwcb) together. Your past experiences influence your present, so by diving into your personal and family relationship history and dynamics, you are able to explore the patterns of hurt from your childhood and observe how they play out in your current relationship. It can also show how you developed the values you hold most near and dear. This exploration is meant to increase spouse’s understanding of each other in order to improve their bond, reduce defensiveness, and increase their ability to provide empathetic support.

People often think of values as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but viewing them in this way magnifies the differences between partners. Instead, consider the framework of ***value zones***. Value zones are meant to incorporate all of the experiences, beliefs, and feelings that you have about a value while honoring the priority line for each individual. The priority line represents the specific points where each individual feels most comfortable.



You tend to become more conscious of the priority line and your place on it when your ranking is in conflict with someone else’s. Mates who prioritize honesty differently may be more likely to have recurring arguments, tension, hostility, and silent disagreements about honesty and duplicity. Some may argue the inherent morality of certain values because of the importance you have assigned to a specific value feels so right to you.



However, the goal should not be to argue the morality or rightness of your versus their value stance. Deciding that one partner is right and one is wrong draws a line down the center of the relationship. Creating “right” and “wrong” sides of the issue renders your stepcouple relationship vulnerable to destruction. The goal should be focused on identifying the value conflict that threatens the relationship so that you can reduce the conflict and find the best compromise. Compromise should not be one partner constantly conceding to the other; rather it should be a way to make each partner “halfway-happy.” Neither party may get what they want, but they should be able to give a bit without totally conceding until they meet somewhere in the middle.

Values are able to be changed, but it requires a large investment of energy, time, and desire to modify values. Values typically change within a relationship where there is enough love and trust to risk trying new behaviors. As you learn more about each other’s value zones, you may find that previously tense topics can become easier. In the value zones where you and your spouse are at different points of the priority line, being able to accept the gap can make it easier to live with. Over time, value differences can adapt and morph as each partner learns more about their spouse’s stories and viewpoints. Healthy spouses can “test drive” new behaviors, experience the benefits, and shift their position accordingly. However, this process hinges on the presence of openness and willingness to take risks. Healthy partners understand that moderation takes time and perseverance and developing a value framework that works for both partners.

***What can we do?***

1. **Learn to identify value conflicts.** - The most common indicators of a value conflict is feeling frustrated, baffled, not understanding your partner’s point of view, feeling confused, and being willing to listen but not “getting it.” Value conflicts recur and become heated or hot spots when issues start or go unaddressed for long periods of time. When partners simply cannot understand their partner’s point of view, it may be helpful to utilize [Simple Listen & Repeat](#_q8g79bp2nr95). This allows couples to articulate their viewpoint one at a time and ensure that their spouse understands before they move on or continue the conversation.
2. **Identify value conflict zones.** - It is important to avoid the black-and-white views on subjects, which leaves no room for the inbetween. Healthy couples are able to articulate differences and similarities; unhealthy couples assign blame.
3. **Set yourselves up for success.** - Start the conversation when tensions are low; not in the middle of an argument. When couples are in disagreement, it is harder to think rationally, listen actively, and talk calmly. If emotions run high, stick to the goal of being calm and having a productive conversation about values. Calm your own angry impulses and listen respectfully - even if they aren’t. Resist the temptation to start or resume arguing. If you tend to catch yourself in the middle of an argument with your spouse saying things that you don’t mean, saying hurtful things, or yelling/screaming, it may help to implement some basic [communication rules](#_vw4kv72qqc41). These rules are set up as a guideline to encourage respectful communication between partners. Typically, these include things like speaking respectfully from your own perspective, controlling the volume of your voice, avoiding assumptions and degrading remarks, and evaluating your emotional state to determine when a time-out is needed. When people feel respected, they are more likely to have productive conversations. If you and your partner are prone to having more negative reactions when your stress is high due to depleted self-control, a simple [Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd) can make a big difference in how you interact with your partner.
4. **Speak from your point of view.** - It is easy to play into the trap of discussing feelings in a way that may result in defensiveness or attacking position. Thoughts and feelings play into how we shape our words and instead of successfully telling our partners how we feel, we unintentionally end up blaming them. We often have trouble listening fully to what is being said when we feel as if we are being blamed or accused of something. Our ears turn off and we often begin to formulate a response or defense instead of listening to what is being said. Blame and accusation prevent effective communication from happening. In order to prevent that, try to speak from your own perspective and point of view using [I-statements](#_dzi9m77cluw) and provide stories from your past as needed. An I-statement uses the template “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation)” in order to clarify your feelings. When you share stories behind your differing value positions, you can explore the differences with the goal of understanding each other’s point of view. Once you’ve mastered I-statements, using [TANGO](#_q50rzn8uvu1v) is a good way to be able to express your feelings about a situation and allow your partner to summarize your feelings to show they’ve heard and provide their own response.
5. **Understand your partner’s point of view.** - Taking a step out of your head and your experiences to step into your partner’s shoes can help to lessen the tension of value conflicts. Values arise out of past experiences, so you should listen to the stories behind your partner’s values. Look for ways to strengthen the priorities that you share. Since changing deeply-held values takes a long time, stepcouples tend to offset tension by emphasizing “us-ness” and the commonalities they share to act as glue to hold the couple together. Be interested and curious about what your partner has to say. Understanding why your partner’s viewpoint differs from your own is the first step in reconciling your value conflicts because a glimmer of understanding can go a long way.
6. **Understand yourself.** - It is important to dive into your past experiences, too, to understand how they can contribute to your own positions. Just like you not understanding your partner’s point of view, your partner may not understand your point of view.
7. **In absence of a shared value, make one.** - Taking an inventory of your personal values can clarify the places where you and your partner overlap. However, it also provides the possibility that an overlap may not exist in values and goals. When an overlap does not exist, it is important for the couple to create a shared value to cling to. Using the intervention [Building a New Strength](#_jpa1st48arve) can help establish the framework of selecting and negotiating a shared value. When wedges seek to push you apart in your relationship, you can counteract it with powerful stepcouple glue. A stepcouple who has a strong shared value of staying together can handle other value conflicts more easily. Exploring your partner’s value stance and how you can adapt your behaviors and beliefs is easier when you know you’re in the relationship for the long haul.
8. **Recognize that change is hard.** - The first step in value evolution is deciding to be willing to try something different. Change does not feel natural, but can cause positive outcomes. When there is tension in the stepcouple relationship in regards to value conflicts, the rest of the family can feel it. Regardless of the specific issue, stepcouples can thrive when they actively explore their value differences and strategize ways to deal with them long-term. By closely observing the other end of the priority line and trying new behaviors, you are able to reconcile the differences.
9. **Think of the kids.** - When repartnering, value differences are bound to come up. Children are often particularly perceptive when the adults in their life have a value conflict. Acknowledge that value differences exist in your relationship when they come up. The children already know that you disagree, but confirming their perceptions can teach them to trust the experience of disagreeing, but being willing to work on the issue. This provides a model of healthy adult behavior, shows that value conflicts can be resolved, and demonstrates that stepfamilies are capable of providing a broader and more inclusive view of life.
10. **Love your partner through the struggle.** - Conflict can work to push a couple apart, but love can bring a couple together. Love brought you together initially, and conflict is a vital time to protect it. You are not very likely to be in a loving mood in the middle of a conflict, but strive to behave and speak in kind and respectful ways. Your feelings will follow your actions.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Psychological Needs Card Sort

Family of Origin

Communication Rules

A Coke and a Smile

I-Statements Vs. You-Statements

TANGO Communication Skills

Building a New Strength

# Rules, Rules, Rules

Two of the most challenging things a stepcouple can face when blending families is negotiating the new rules and expectations for the family and handling discipline. This chapter and the chapter on [limits and boundaries](#_v8ofh5d189zz) go hand-in-hand. Just like individuals have various boundaries and limits, so should the family which is reflected in the family rules.

Keep these in mind as you start to negotiate the new rules for your family:

1. **Present rules in a family meeting**

You and your spouse are the adults in the family and are in charge of setting the guidelines and expectations for the family. One of the perks of being in a stepcouple relationship is that you get to take advantage of your past parenting and family successes in order to create the family expectations that you want. As your stepcouple relationship stabilizes and family rules and expectations are decided, a family meeting may be helpful to introduce the expectations while leaving room for everyone’s input, concerns, and opinions. Allowing input gives every member of the family some feeling of control over the situation, but as the adults, you get the final say on the family policy; the stepcouple is in charge.

1. **Ambiguity causes stress**

When referring to personal boundaries, the previous chapter said it best: the absence of clearly defined physical and emotional spaces makes boundary crossings more likely. In family rules, the same idea applies: the absence of clearly defined boundaries makes rule-breaking more likely. Having those clear-cut boundaries leaves little room for misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the family rules.

1. **You may not get it right the first time**

Just like in your first family and first relationship, rules and expectations changed and adapted to meet your changing needs. It can be a bit of trial and error at the start. Recognize that things can seem pretty simple and straightforward in discussion but may be impossible to practice. For example, making a family rule that prevents the children from snacking before dinner makes sense in order to ensure that they will be hungry for dinner. However, if dinner is not typically served until 7pm or if they have sport practices before dinner, that can be a challenging rule to uphold in practice.

Discipline can also be a tricky area to navigate. Is your spouse trying to be a “Disney Dad” or “Merry Mom” by avoiding disciplining the children in order to maintain good favor? Are you allowed to discipline your partner’s children? Do the children obey you when you discipline them? These are difficult things to address when trying to co-parent children.

Your discipline style encompasses all the strategies you use to modify your children’s behavior. Conflicts over discipline styles are common in couples. Being aware of and able to express the contrasts in your styles is a significant step to begin reducing the conflict. Depending on which discipline methods you use most often, your discipline style tends to be either autocratic, permissive, or authoritative.

* **Autocratic Parents** - attempt to control children through yelling, lecturing, commanding, ordering, bribing, threatening, or punishing. They may use corporal punishment and assume the role of “Boss” in the family. Any challenge of a parental directive is unacceptable.
* **Permissive Parents** - little effort to control children and offer unlimited freedom. They often choose to be a friend instead of a parent with their kids. When displeased with children’s behavior, they plead, wish things were different, hope and wait for things to change, or resign themselves to the way things are. They facilitate the dynamic that the child is in charge, can follow their own wants and instincts, and makes their own decisions.
* **Authoritative Parents** - clearly communicate expectations, requirements, and consistent rules to children. They use clear statements, negotiation, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills to adjust the rules and requirements. These parents may create incentives for desired behavior and let children experience natural consequences. They facilitate the parents’ job as a leader and guide and the child’s responsibility to think, learn, and grow.

Conflicts in discipline styles can be overwhelming and sometimes, the situation can feel intolerable. It is important to focus initially on the process of dealing with conflicts over discipline style, rather than eliminating them. A conversation to learn more about each other’s style and understand each other can go a long way in your relationship.

Ask:

*Why do children misbehave?*

*When can you realistically expect your children to behave? To misbehave?*

*What’s your philosophy about disciplining children? Where did it come from?*

*Which strategies do you use most often to discipline your children? Pick your top 5.*

| Incentives | Being Assertive | Pleading | Consequences | Commanding |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ordering | Negotiation | Waiting | Yielding | Requesting |
| Rewarding | Punishing | Bribing | Resolving Conflict | Threatening |
| Yelling | Lecturing | Relying on Rules | Giving Up | Spanking |

*How well do they work for you? Are you mostly happy with the results?*

*Are there tactics you’d like to use more? Which ones?*

*Which would you like to use less?*

*Which strategies would you never use?*

*Which ones do the two of you use in common?*

*Which ones don’t you use in common? Where do you disagree?*

Be sure to discuss your parenting and disciplining differences with each other with respect, use positive communication skills, listen to and understand each other’s point of view, and turn your attention towards achieving common ground. It is important to hear out your partner and avoid reacting with anger or defensiveness.

***What can I do?***

* ***Avoid moving too fast*** - New stepparents sometimes believe that their role comes with immediate parental authority and that obedience is a virtue of their position in the stepfamily. However, that positional authority may work some of the time, but not all the time. Too much discipline too early negatively affects the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild. Having the biological spouse start out as the main disciplinarian and supporting them as they set boundaries will help to demonstrate to the children what the limits are and model how you as a stepparent can begin to share in the responsibility of discipline. As trust and respect develops in your relationship with your stepchild, they become more amenable to behavioral requests and discipline.
* ***Everyone is on the same page*** - If you notice your partner struggling with disciplining the children, it may be a good time for a family meeting. In the family meeting, all family members can voice their concerns about the discipline. Since you and your spouse are the adults in charge of the home, you may need to set the clear expectation to the children that whether or not you are present, your partner shares authority in the house and will be obeyed. Reiterating the family rules and the disciplinary action that can be taken when the rules are broken give clear guidelines for both your spouse and children to follow.
* ***Practice*** - It may help to think of a script for when misbehavior happens and you need to discipline your partner’s children. If your partner is not present or if you are unsure about how severe the discipline ought to be, it is okay to propose a negotiation of terms with your spouse when they return. Something along the lines of, “In our family, we have rules about [insert topic] that need to be followed. When rules are broken, [insert punishment] is the agreed-upon punishment. We can discuss the event with your parent later to negotiate the terms of your punishment.”
* ***Remember the limits of your control*** - You are in control of the rules and expectations of your household, but not what happens in your children’s other households. It doesn’t matter how much you may dislike their rules or lifestyle; you can voice your opinion, but you cannot control the other household. Deciding jointly with your spouse the rules, limits, and expectations in your family makes an important statement about what you believe is appropriate. Sometimes there are significant value differences between households. You are likely to pour into your relationship with your spouse to understand and reconcile with your partner’s value standpoint, but you are unlikely to have or want the same opportunity with your child’s other parent.
	+ Don’t panic - your child’s values aren’t formed immediately. Withholding any genuinely physically or emotionally harmful behaviors, you only need to balance your stepchild’s experience with another point of view. When children are confronted with differing values, it can expand their perspective on life to enable them to make positive choices later in life.
	+ It is important to demonstrate to your stepchild that while you are not comfortable with their parent’s values, you aren’t condemning them. Confirm your children’s experiences in the other household without labeling them as positive or negative. Demonstrate the values you’d prefer in your household. Your tolerance plants seeds that take time to mature, but your restraint can water them.
	+ Separate the conflicting values from other divorce-related content to stay focused. If your partner and their ex-spouse are in conflict, don’t lump all their negative qualities under the title “Bad Parent.” If you make it clear that you think the “other” house’s values are wrong, you put the child in the position of being pulled between two points of view. When conflict escalates, children lose the most. As a stepparent, it is most important to allow your stepchild to love and honor both parents.
	+ If you’re experiencing value conflicts with your ex-spouse, continue working on any lingering divorce issues. By displacing your resentment, hurt, or rage from your divorce onto value conflicts, it can ignite hot spot arguments.
* ***Forgive the “Disney Dads” and “Merry Moms”*** - Occasionally, divorced parents can fall into the trap of competing with their former partners and resent them when their lifestyles, rules, and expectations don’t reflect the ones in your household, or even the ones from your previous marriage. Some parents decide to compete to win the favor of their children by being more lax, having less rules, or leaving discipline to the other parent. We call them “Disney Dads” and “Merry Moms” because they only want to be in the good parts of the children’s lives and avoid the negative, hard parts. That part can really be frustrating for the parent who is enforcing the rules and disciplining, but remember the point above: you can only control your household, not your children’s other households. Children thrive best in environments where there is a balance between love and fun and discipline and rules. They may idolize that other “fun” parent for some time, but appreciate the structure of a balanced home in the long run.
* ***Be patient with your children*** - When you are happy in your new relationship or remarriage, but your children appear to be mourning, it can be disappointing. It may be easy to feel angry or impatient with them for not being as happy as you are or fearful that they may never come to terms with your new marriage. During this time, it is important to be patient with your children and to create an open environment. Try to be open to their feelings of anger, sadness, and disappointment in order to convey the message that all of their feelings are welcome in the new household you are creating. **Avoid** taking their anger as a personal attack on you or your partner and recognize that it may be displaced feelings of loss and sadness; take comfort that time will help heal their grief and adjust to the “new normal.”

# Relationships are Changing

Surprise! When you repartner, things - especially relationships - start to change.

You start off with your own “circle.”

**Your parents and siblings Your relatives**

**Your friends Your kids**

**Your coworkers**

Then, you add the connections from your previous partner. Luckily, in some cases, you don’t have to “keep” all these connections.

**Your children’s other parent(s) Your ex-spouse's family
Your ex-spouse’s new partner Your ex-spouse’s friends**

**Your shared friends from the previous relationship Your ex-spouse’s**

**Coworkers**

Now, you’re adding in all your new partner’s connections

**Their parents and siblings Their relatives**

**Their friends Their kids**

**Their ex-spouse’s connections Their coworkers
Their ex-spouse**

That’s a lot of connections. It can be difficult to navigate new relationships while also trying to learn how to be a new stepparent, and how to be a partner in a new marriage.

Additionally, not only do you acquire new relationships, but the old ones change. The relationship with your ex-partner changes. Your relationship with your children changes from being a parent in a marriage, to a single parent or shared-custody parent, to a parent with a new spouse. You may lose friends if they feel they need to choose “sides” in the divorce, or if they do not like your new spouse. It is a challenge to keep up with the inevitability of relationship changes following a new marriage.

And sometimes, the roles can feel like they are at odds with each other. “Being a good parent” by attending your children’s extracurricular activities may take away from the marriage. Focusing on strengthening your marriage might take away from engaging with your ex-spouse in co-parenting issues. It can feel like a lose-lose situation in that no matter whom you’re spending time with, someone else needs you at the same time.

***How do I figure this out?***

* *Give it time and trust the process.* The more experience (and success) you have acting in these roles, the more comfortable you will be. Also, if you trust the affection and respect from the people around you, you tend to be more comfortable interacting with them.
* *Remain clear about your loyalties.* This isn’t about choosing sides. This is about choosing your relationship and choosing to address confusion and conflict in a positive manner. If you (and your partner) are feeling loved and supported in your relationship, you are better able to tackle stepfamily challenges.
* *Turn to your partner.* This period of transition is challenging and being in a stepcouple causes strain. Instead of turning away from your partner to deal with stress (like going to friends, or to your kids, or to a vice), turn to your partner and look to them to help get you through the stress.
* *An ex-partner may still be a part of the family.* When you are a part of a stepcouple, an ex-partner continuing to be a part of your family is possible. Some events, like birthday celebrations and holiday dinners can be duplicated to prevent previous partners from mingling. However, events like your children’s sports games, graduations, school concerts, weddings, and dance recitals may require ex-spouses to navigate how to attend the same event or if someone needs to be absent. There is no rule to help decide when to include or exclude the “other” parents. Developing and accepting the reality of needing to negotiate new terms and expectations with ex-spouses are a necessary part of the stepcoupling process.
* *Be aware of your reactions to past partners.* In new stepcouple relationships, the bond shared between ex-spouses that is based on a shared history and co-parenting can be intimidating for the new spouse. When a new spouse is feeling threatened or insecure about their role and place in the stepfamily, they often have the impulse to exclude the “other” biological parent from family events. Many stepparents feel that allowing the other biological parent into the stepfamily threatens their own relationship with their stepchild. Remember that there is a reason why their relationship did not work and that you are the one married to your spouse. You cannot erase their previous partners and they cannot erase yours. Most successful stepcouples are able to eventually come to emotional terms with their spouse’s past partners by focusing on the present and planning for the future with your spouse.
* *Have a game plan.* If you and your spouse decide to include a biological parent in an event, having a plan ready on how you will take care of your relationship. Strategize how to stay connected with each other. If your spouse’s former partner typically makes you feel threatened, take preventive measures upfront. Stay close to each other and check in with each other periodically. Offer or ask for extra reassurance or attention. Give yourself a pep talk and remember why you are there. If an event is longer, like several hours or days, it may be helpful to have a [5-Minute Date Night](#_btun7wwrb02k) during the event to check in and support each other. If all else fails, ignore what the “other” parent is saying and doing.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Date Night

# Sweet Little Beans

You know what we’re talking about - your children and stepchildren. You love them, you [don’t quite] hate them, you can’t live without them. And they are a beautiful, chaotic, and important part of your blended family.

***Why are the children taking this remarriage so poorly?***

There are so many possibilities as to why children may be acting out, appear upset or angry, or may reject their new stepparent and stepfamily.

* Children often define family as *biological family* and not marital status. When divorced parents try to push each other out of the first-family boundary and add a stepparent to the family, children’s emotional health is challenged. Children are driven to love their parents, but when a stepcouple subtly or explicitly express that a biological parent is unloveable, they experience an internal conflict between their natural affection and loyalty to their biological parent and trying to avoid distress and discourse in the stepfamily.
* Children are often able to see and react to the darker side of marriage before you do. A wedding can mark the transition between fantasy and reality about the finality of their parents’ divorce, which can be hard for children to accept that their parents will not be getting back together.
* Some children may express hostility towards their biological parent for bringing a stranger (or strangers) into their family and/or resentment towards their stepparent for their presence. Many children may perceive the addition of a stepparent as an attempt to replace a biological parent.
* Some children may be vulnerable to taking things personally. When parents divorce, it is not uncommon for children to blame themselves for the divorce - even if the real reason for their parents’ divorce could have nothing to do with them. Shame and hurt can happen when a new stepparent brings in stepsiblings for the child by perceiving that they were not “enough” to keep their family together, or that their parent may be “upgrading” by getting a “new family.”
* The transition to divorce may be easier for children to swallow than the transition to remarriage because in divorces, the children *and* parents collectively experience grief, loss, and a change in housing, standards of living, parental or child roles, and responsibilities in the home. However, in remarriages, the stepcouple sees all the positive possibilities, whereas the children are prone to seeing all of their losses: loss of parental time and attention, familiar routines, personal space, etc.
* Children may have differing opinions about having both biological parents present at events. Some children may enjoy it, and some may feel upset and torn. Older children tend to remember when their parents were married and can vividly recall the pain of the divorce. Seeing both parents together can stimulate both sets of memories and be painful to remember. Children who fantasize about a parental reunion may feel anxious or sad when they see their biological parents together.
* The older the child, the more resistant they may be to a remarriage. They may resist the new spouse in the role of their biological parent, or they may feel loyal to their biological parent and resist newcomers. Children may also feel angry about the remarriage and instead of directing their anger towards their parent, they displace it onto the stepparent.

Children often have a hard time changing roles and role displacements are not uncommon.

Combining families usually means that everyone’s roles change.

* ***Role displacements happen.*** - Single children may become one of a bunch. Birth orders reshuffle when stepsiblings move in. Youngest children get ousted from their position by a younger stepsibling. The eldest can become a middle child. Even if a child’s birth order is maintained, there may still be a role change. Being the youngest of two can feel different than being the youngest of five or six. The transition can be difficult for children.
* ***You may need to help facilitate a role transition.*** - Sometimes, when parents begin single-parenting after a divorce or death of a spouse, adults may be tempted to turn their children into adult-like partners in co-parenting and confidants. When parents remarry and form a stepcouple, tension emerges between the “spousified” child and the new spouse. The close-knit parent-child relationship won’t work with the new spouse and helps to exclude them. The child may value the increase in responsibilities that came from them stepping into an adult role and resist letting that role go due to comfort, privilege, or loyalty. Remember that a child who has taken on a role of caring for their parent, whether that is as companion, confidant, or counselor, is likely not being properly cared for themselves. As the biological parent loosens that parent-child tie to create emotional space for the new spouse, new boundaries and roles for the family can be defined while still meeting the child’s needs for comfort, guidance, and reassurance.
	+ Children can be guided out of the spousified role and back into being a child by encouraging age-appropriate pursuits like resuming hobbies, extracurricular activities, camps, part-time jobs, and spending time with friends.
	+ Don’t take the challenge from your stepchild personally. Resist the temptation to fight for the role of your partner’s companion; it only confirms the spousified child’s misconception that there is only one valuable role in the stepfamily.
	+ Remember to take time to get your own needs met and to take time for your relationship. Pouring into your relationship strengthens your bond and relationship foundation in order to address issues together. It can also provide the comfort and support needed to cope with a difficult situation. Spousified children can demand a large role in your relationship and become an unconscious third person in your couple. Show your partner that you value them and the stepcouple relationship by having [Date Nights](#_btun7wwrb02k); just the two of you. If time feels like a constant issue, try a 5-minute Date Night.
* ***Displacements present behaviorally.*** - Children often experience their role change and displacement at the same time that they face many other stepfamily issues. Sometimes, distress can present as regressive behaviors; sometimes, they can present as acting out for attention. Understanding the meaning behind your children’s behavior can provide clues to the most effective parenting actions.
	+ Resist your impulse to protect your child when they are displaced by trying to fix what is making them feel unhappy.
	+ Your ability to react to your children and stepchildren’s displacements can also present behaviorally. You may lash out at your spouse or stepchildren in anger.
	+ Remember that reshuffling roles is a normal part of creating a stepfamily.
	+ Work together as a team within your stepcouple to help your children navigate the process, renegotiate their unique role in the family, acknowledge what they’ve gained and lost, and understand and validate the children’s experiences in the transition.
	+ Keep in mind that the amount of personal space, responsibilities, and bandwidth for attention and affection can diminish or change as more people are added to the family.
* ***Labeling children prevents complexity.*** - Roles are assigned to individual children based on their personalities, talent, gender, sibling order, needs, and physical attributes that often reflect some degree of truth. However, having fixed roles and labels can encourage others to overlook, ignore, or misinterpret the subtle personality traits of the individual. Labels are an inaccurate shorthand about a complex individual and drive your entire perception of them, which pigeonholes them into a behavioral box. The more you affirm your belief about a child’s attributes (good or bad), the more they’ll believe it and adapt their behavior to fit your belief. Call a child ‘courageous’ enough and they’ll start acting courageous. Call a child ‘stupid’ enough and they’ll believe it and start making bad decisions or trying less in school. Children are (and are meant to be) multidimensional, constantly changing, and full of contradictions.
	+ Be conscientious of the language you use to describe the children in the home.
	+ Avoid leaping to general descriptions of the character or description of who a child is and focus more on specific observations.
	+ Stepparents hold a special position as being the one to challenge roles and labels set forth by the initial nuclear family.

In many stepfamilies, the members live part-time in their household and the other time with their other parent. That changes the relationship and dynamic of the family considerably! Here are some things to keep in mind as your family transitions:

* *Children who live outside the home*

In some families, there are family members that live outside the home, such as college students, active military young adults, children who are seen for visitation, and independently living young adults. It’s up to you to decide the role that these members play in the stepfamily. You are creating a new family together and it is up to you and your partner if your adult children or visiting children play a part in the new family. Think about how your college student fits into the family when they come home for holiday breaks. How included do you want them to feel? Do you want them to feel like they have a permanent role in the nuclear family, or would it be better for their role to be like a visiting relative? Do they have a room to come home to, or do they stay on the couch or in a guest room?

* *Children that live in the house part-time*

Some children bounce back and forth between their biological parents’ homes due to visitation and custody arrangements. What sort of expectations do you have for those children when they are at your home? Is the number of chores proportionate to the amount of time they are spending at your house? How do you intend to help them feel that their new home (or home environment) is permanent, even if the custody arrangement makes living situations feel part-time? Remember that they are not used to sharing your attention with other children outside of their nuclear family. Their sporadic presence in the home can also be a pressure point for stepfamily issues, particularly if a part-time child moves in full-time. Stepsiblings may try to keep them in a visitor/outsider position in the family

* *Children living full-time in the house, while others live part-time*

This is also not an unusual circumstance. Some children live full-time with one parent and some children live part-time with each parent. The changing size of the family based on a given day or week can be difficult to adjust to for all family members. Similar to the part-time children, the full-time children aren’t used to sharing your attention. Keep in mind the proportion of your attention that falls on the full-time waxes and wanes depending on the number of children in the house, which can influence children’s bond with the stepcouple and their temperaments. Imagine having a child that typically receives a lot of attention in their nuclear family, but the child appears to be acting out when their older stepsiblings join the family. The child may be used to the attention they receive from you normally and be acting out in order to get the same amount of attention, good or bad.

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# Creating blended families or stepfamilies with teenagers can often feel more daunting than creating families with toddlers. Adolescence can sometimes challenge a couple more than any other developmental phase. It can be difficult to support and love a child whose interests, appearance, and behavior differ greatly from what they’re comfortable with; however, biological parents have the ability to draw upon their shared history with their child to remind themselves of the best parts of the child. Stepparents lack the shared history and may react by distancing themselves or try to wait until the child moves out, which can cause more problems.

# *What should we do?*

* ***Listen*** - Sounds simple, but is much harder in practice. Teens often don’t care about their parents’ inputs, opinions, or reactions. They want to feel heard while voicing their beliefs and emotions.
* ***Avoid investigation*** - Investigation happens when parents gather information about their teens through trust-breaking techniques like eavesdropping, grilling them about their sex life or substance use, or searching their teen’s bedroom. When investigation happens, chances of a positive relationship with the teen reduces.
* ***Remember that identity exploration is normal*** - Normal adolescents will experiment with styles as they attempt to figure out who they are and their place in the world. Style variations are typically harmless and can accompany strange music taste, language, appearance, hobbies, friends, and behaviors. However, an eye should be kept out for aberrant behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, chronic relationship problems, anger, isolation, depression, explosive behavior, and school failure. Allowing your teen to experiment with styles while emphasizing building a trusting relationship with your teen will create a safer and closer relationship.

Another issue that often arises with children is lying. Some children may experiment with lying in order to escape blame, avoid responsibility, keep up with peers, maintain privacy from parents, get attention, or because they understand that telling the truth may come at a steep price. Your child or stepchild may want to consciously or unconsciously wedge you and your spouse apart. Engaging in arguments about their lying behaviors could force that wedge deeper.

When your children lie, avoid reacting with rage or shaming the child. Instead, acknowledge their dishonesty and keep your child accountable by issuing appropriate consequences to reinforce that truth-telling behaviors occur.

Sometimes, your stepchildren’s behavior may be mirroring a parental value that makes you uncomfortable. Early in a stepcouple relationship, honeymooning can occur which allows you to see the value conflicts in a stepchild easier because you are blinded to any value conflicts with your partner. Your stepchild can make an easier scapegoat than your partner.

This value conflict is usually represented by a value zone line. Your own value position is typically very deeply held, which can make your partner’s opposing position *feel* very wrong to you. It can be hard to remember that your partner’s point of view isn’t wrong, just different and it is important to reconcile the gap between them. Read more about value zones in [The Value of Values](#_3szly0fz6q0h).

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Date Night

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# Expecting Too Much

It is also important to consider your expectations when it comes to forming a stepfamily. Did you ever think that you would be a part of one? How do you know what to expect?

* *Society*
	+ Society tends to tell us that first-and-only marriages are the expectation and it will be long and enduring. But that is not reality. According to the *Stepcoupling* book, for every two weddings celebrated in a year, a divorce is finalized. Also, in the mid 1990s, 1 in 3 Americans identified as a stepparent, stepchild, stepsibling, or a member of a stepfamily. That is reality.
* *Pop Culture*
	+ Some movies and television shows depict remarriages and blended families. But how accurate are those *really*? “The Brady Bunch” is the hope for blended families but definitely not the norm. A Brady stepchild would never argue with a stepparent about their authority over them, no Brady stepparent would feel like an outsider, and their conflicts would last no more than 20 minutes of an episode before making up. Shows like “Modern Family'' and “True Colors” give a more realistic, albeit comedic take on stepfamilies and blended families. They may still be able to resolve a family conflict within the time frame of an episode, but the family dynamic feels more realistic.
* *Personal History*
	+ Your childhood, your previous marriage (if you had one), and your interactions with stepfamilies and stepfamily life can influence your expectations on what to expect from being a member of a blended family. You draw on what you know.
* *Culture*
	+ Our culture puts out the picture that all you need for happiness is a nuclear family consisting of a mother, a father, and a small group of well-behaved children. This fiction is the basis that can form the standard on which you judge your new family. But this ideal of perfection doesn’t account for grief, or financial struggles, or substance abuse, or physical violence, or simply falling out of love with each other, which challenge how effective the nuclear family is to marital bliss. There are also cultural pressures that influence the value and importance you place on parenting activities. Particularly for women, the pressure to value the needs and interests of the children (whether they are your own or not) over their own is reinforced, along with the cultural values of women’s caregiving and nurturing feelings and behaviors. Living in a stepfamily doesn’t necessarily mean that it feels like it measures up to the societal standard of a “family.” Having discomfort with the prefix “step” can reflect a conflict between your values about family and those of the culture around you.
* *Partner’s Expectations*
	+ Not only are you battling your own expectations of how to form a stepfamily or be a stepparent, but you may also be juggling your partner’s expectations. Sometimes, partners expect for their new spouse to fill the metaphorical shoes of the previous spouse, which can be an inflated or unobtainable standard that you feel you are constantly comparing yourself to or failing to achieve. If you don’t fit the mold of the kind of stepparent they wanted you to be, you can feel discouraged or discord can arise in the marriage. Navigating the “job description” of a stepparent can be challenging, so be patient with yourself and your partner. Taking time to sort out what you need from your partner using the [Psychological Needs Card Sort](#_7k5u8jnywxxf) can help to identify what specific expectations you have for your partner. You can also consider the [dreams](#_mpae6mf0zbs0) you have for your relationship that can help identify those vulnerable areas to relationship distress and your underlying needs for your relationship.

These expectations can paint an unobtainable or unrealistic picture on what is possible, which is shown by the gap between your expectations and experience. This results in the 3 Ds:

***Disappointment*** - occurs when you experience the effects of the gap and when people feel disappointed, they start to blame others

***Discord*** - occurs in response to the blame that arises out of disappointment

***Disillusionment*** - that unrealistic picture of what you believe will happen or how things will go that make you vulnerable to disappointment

There are also realistic expectations and unrealistic expectations to have:

 **Realistic Unrealistic**

\* Your partner will keep you and your children safe \* Your partner will never get angry

\* You will be treated with respect \* Your partner is expected to read your mind
\* Your partner will make an effort to care about \* Your partner will be able to do everything

 your kids your previous spouse did with the same
\* Your partner will be able to fulfill some whims enthusiasm, technique, and skill level

\* Your partner will fulfill *every* desire and whim

Imagine that you are starting a brand-new job in a brand new field, where you don’t understand the job description, responsibilities, or how to respond or behave. This is often the case in stepfamilies; everyone is transitioning into a new role with typically almost no experience, and any experience they do have from their first family or childhood doesn’t quite translate to the new stepfamily. It is easy to beat yourself up, get discouraged, or want to give up. This is natural, but don’t give up; there is no instruction manual or “job description” for any stepfamily member. You can’t expect yourself to know how to act in a completely new role. Every new stepfamily shapes the roles for each person over time to create the best fit for the family.
*Role influences:*

* **History** - Your background and childhood experiences will shape how you interact in a stepfamily as an adult. You may also need some time to sort out the differences between adult roles in a first family and those in a stepfamily.
* **Partners** - Your partner can influence how you play out your role as a partner and parent because they likely may have a different view of what the behaviors, expectations, and roles are for their stepcouple. Most couples have to work through their differences and negotiate a mutually satisfying agreement for their family and the roles.
* **Children** - Your role as a stepparent evolves as you interact with your stepchildren. Their implicit and explicit feedback shapes your role as you balance their preferences with your style. When children have residential or visitation schedules, your role in their lives may look different than if you shared a house with them all or most of the time. Additionally, the ages of your children impact your role development because younger children are more readily able to make room in their life for another adult than adolescents and teens.

Expectations are not exclusive to partners, relationships, and children; they can be for yourself, as well. When it comes to loving your children, it’s natural and a realistic expectation. You hold that deep emotional bond of them being the fruit of your loins. However, it is an unrealistic expectation that you will love your stepchildren equally as much as your own children *or at all.*

Here’s where the gap can occur in personal expectations:

* In situations where a biological parent has passed away, the new stepparent may be tempted to dive right into the role of loving parent instead of the stepparent role.
* Women are pressured to conform to cultural expectations of being a good mother and to mother their stepchildren as their own.
* Both men and women may feel that they have to perform heroically for their spouses as a super-stepparent.
* Stepparents may try to work against their personal nature, habits, and preferences to be the “perfect stepparent,” but ultimately feel miserable.
* Stepparents may feel pressured to have relationships as deep and close and loving as the ones with their own children.
* When stepparents feel disappointed and disillusioned, they may avoid telling their partner and try harder to be an even more loving stepparent...which leads to increased disappointment and exerted energy.
* A stepparent may turn their negative feelings inwards and blame themselves for being a failure as a stepparent. This could result in negative symptoms like decreased energy, depression, or avoidance behaviors like drinking or wanting to stay away from home.
* Stepparents may hope that helping raise their partner’s child will help them have a biological parent experience. However, raising someone else’s child can’t replace the experience of having your own children. Being a stepparent provides the opportunity for a special, new role that is incomparable to being a biological parent.

Now, that’s not to say that you won’t develop a positive, healthy relationship with your stepchildren. You may feel obligated to love your stepchildren for any number of reasons, but that does not mean that loving comes any easier. Fond attachment and love are two very different, but acceptable responses as a stepparent and no one can predict the outset if the relationship will or will not eventually include love.

*What should you do?*

Treat yourself more kindly

Get to know your stepchildren as individuals

Appreciate your stepchildren’s strengths, talents, and positive qualities

Be honest with yourself and your spouse

Be yourself and not what you think you’re supposed to be

Be more aware of your feelings, negative or positive, regarding your stepchildren

Forgive yourself

Forgive your stepchildren for not loving you (yet)

Hang in there and see what happens

Sometimes, negative feelings about your stepchildren may occur. When these negative feelings are suppressed, the stepcouple relationship is often profoundly affected. Imagine a soda bottle being shaken up; eventually, it will explode. Disliking or resenting your stepchildren can play out in your marriage in a number of ways: maybe becoming angry with a spouse, withholding sex or emotional intimacy, or displacing anger on other people like your spouse’s ex. *This is an especially important time to be honest with your spouse.* Unspoken feelings can fester and cause distance between partners. Honesty can be risky, but the alternative is worse. The goal is to set a positive stage for future discussions.

***How do we be totally honest without causing a big fight?***

* *Be open, honest, and clear about how you are feeling and how the situation affects you.*

Thoughts and feelings play into how we shape our words, and instead of successfully telling our partners how we feel, we unintentionally end up blaming them. We often have trouble listening fully to what is being said when we feel as if we are being blamed or accused of something. Our ears turn off and we often begin to formulate a response or defense instead of listening to what is being said. Blame and accusation prevent effective communication from happening. In order to prevent that, try to speak from your own perspective and point of view using [I-statements](#_dzi9m77cluw) and provide stories from your past as needed. An I-statement uses the template “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation)” in order to clarify your feelings. When you share stories behind your differing value positions, you can explore the differences with the goal of understanding each other’s point of view. Once you’ve mastered I-statements, using [TANGO](#_q50rzn8uvu1v) is a good way to be able to express your feelings about a situation and allow your partner to summarize your feelings to show they’ve heard and provide their own response.

* *Know your warning signs and take a break before a blow up.*

If you and/or your partner are prone to big blow-up arguments, it can be helpful to utilize a [Time-Out](#_8etdgfuip7pc). First, you need to look inside to know what your [warning signs](#_io15a7sve25p) are physically, emotionally, and mentally at the start of an argument. Knowing these warning signs can cue your brain into realizing that you are emotionally flooding and are in need of a break. Time-out is a good technique to pause (not end) a conversation so that you are able to reconvene calmer and more ready for a productive conversation.

* *Respond to your partner respectfully and non-combatively.*

Respect is important in a relationship, but especially when discussing emotion-heavy topics. If you tend to catch yourself in the middle of an argument with your spouse saying things that you don’t mean, saying hurtful things, or yelling/screaming, it may help to implement some basic [communication rules](#_vw4kv72qqc41). These rules are set up as a guideline to encourage respectful communication between partners. Typically, these include things like speaking respectfully from your own perspective, controlling the volume of your voice, avoiding assumptions and degrading remarks, and evaluating your emotional state to determine when a time-out is needed. When people feel respected, they are more likely to have productive conversations. If you and your partner are prone to having more negative reactions when your stress is high due to depleted self-control, a simple [Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd) can make a big difference in how you interact with your partner.

* *Own up when you messed up and come back to your partner with love*

After a time-out or a big blow-up argument, it is important to come back together. However, if you come in too harshly or too strong, you could fall into another argument before you even begin your conversation! A better way to approach your partner is with a [Soft Start-Up](#_j0hli4ykc1gc). By starting with a soft start-up, you are able to approach your partner with love and care and create a setting for a constructive and compassionate conversation. A soft start up can also include an apology; apologizing for your role in the conflict can go a long way in beginning to repair the damage made by the argument.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Psychological Needs Card Sort

Dreams

I-Statements Vs. You-Statements

TANGO Communication Skills

Communication Rules
A Coke and a Smile

Time-Out

Soft Start-Up

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# I’m on the Outside

It’s no secret that blending families can be difficult. There are so many different dynamics and relationships between each member of the family that it can feel overwhelming.

*Things you may not know about blended families:*

* It can sometimes take 4-7 years for members of a stepfamily to feel like a traditional family and figure out the dynamics.
* Sometimes, the stepparent or stepchildren don’t get included in biological family time.
* When a partner feels insecure in the relationship or place in the family, they may compete with the children for their partner’s attention.
* Establishing a comfortable family bond is difficult because the stepfamily is essentially a group of strangers living in the same house, without the common history, shared memories, family jokes, rituals and traditions, behavior norms, or shared surname that nuclear families have.
* The stepcouple requires emotional space that is uniquely theirs in order to nurture their relationship, while still continuing to meet the children’s needs.

In some cases, you may be a previously unattached person marrying into an existing family. It is not uncommon for a new spouse to feel like an outsider to their partner’s relationship with their own children. The *Stepcoupling* book says it best:



The longest-standing and deepest tie in this diagram is the relationship between the biological parent and their child, which is an intense emotional bond. This bond can influence a new spouse feeling pushed to the outside or excluded. Some new spouses decide to commit to a part-time relationship with their partner so that their spouse can spend time with their kids.

It’s a nice gesture, but ***don’t fall into the trap!***

Setting up a pattern of separation over the children can ultimately undermine the strength of the stepcouple relationship and could be the relationship’s demise.

***So now what?***

* Don’t let one partner’s relationship with their children exclude the other.

By bringing the new spouse into time spent with a parent’s biological children (at least part-time), it shows the partner that they matter and building a relationship with the child matters. And having *a little bit* of one-on-one time between the biological parent and child is not going to ruin the marriage. Setting expectations like, my spouse is invited to join in everything with my children except for a few specific activities can help your partner feel included (e.g. our special parent-child brunch on Sundays, the hour that our favorite TV show is on on Thursdays, when we go to the batting cages, etc.). Remember that your partner will likely always feel left out if they believe they have to compete with their stepchildren for your attention. And vice-versa, the children may feel the same way and perpetuate that competition with your partner.

* Keep an eye out for for hostility and tension

Some parents desire to have undivided attention and time with their children for the duration of their visit, or their partners want to give them that time for undivided attention. Just like before, it’s nice ***but it’s a trap!*** By distancing the new partner and the child, the message being portrayed is “I don’t want a relationship with the child,” even though the intention might be, “I don’t want to take away time from you to spend with your parent.” This separation can lead to emotional distance, alienation, and even hostility.

* Pour into all 3 relationships

That is, work should be done to establish, strengthen, and/or deepen the relationship between (1) you and your partner in order to increase your bond and the strength of the stepcouple relationship, as well as (2) between your partner and your children. If your partner feels insecure about their place in the family, their stepchildren and less likely to have faith that they will be a permanent addition. When someone admits when they feel insecure - particularly about their place in the family - it is a vulnerable experience, but one that can bring together partners to become more secure and less competitive. Additionally, (3) nurturing your relationship with your own children is important during the transition into a blended family.

* Check yourself; your reactions to relationships may be reflecting your unconscious feelings

By that, we mean, sometimes a reaction to a relationship is a projection of feelings about something related. For example, maybe you’re dreading having your children visit. That may not be because you are actually dreading having your children visit, but maybe you and your spouse have been arguing about something and you haven’t reached a resolution yet, but you do not want to argue in front of your children. The dread is not about your children, but actually about the feelings related to an unresolved argument and potential for arguing in front of the children.

* Recognize that children may reject the stepparent

It is not uncommon for children to reject a stepparent. When constant rejection occurs from a stepchild, it can be challenging not to feel hurt or take it personally. It can be tempting to demand that your partner address the behavior, but it can begin to affect the stepcouple relationship and increase a child’s underlying anger and resentment. By demanding your partner take your side, you are asking them to collude against their child and choose anger, which can increase children’s behavioral problems and decrease the child’s ability to connect with either parent. Look for the distress that is underlying their rejection; they may be battling grief, loss, or anger that they do not understand or know how to express. Understanding their point of view can help to encourage grace in spite of your pain. Consider:

* + - *My stepchild is sad because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*
		- *They are grieving the loss of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*
		- *One reason they are so angry is because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*
		- *What my stepchild will remember about this time in their life is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*
		- *What we can do to help them with their anger and loss is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*
* Responsibilities in a stepcouple
	+ *Biological parent*
		- Include your partner in your relationships with your children
		- Encourage your children to acknowledge and include your spouse
		- Facilitate “adult-ified” children’s role transitions back into children
	+ *Stepparent*
		- Be flexible about the terms of your inclusion
		- Be present and enthused about creating a relationship with your stepchildren

Sometimes, as the stepparent, you may feel on the outside of biological family discussions or events. Common events and discussions may include privilege increases, drivers licenses, dating, discipline, and school conferences. You may feel that you deserve to know what’s going on in your stepchildren’s lives - especially their school lives - and you absolutely do! Your stepchildren will likely be better-served by you being aware; however, whether or not you should be present for the discussion or event depends on your reason for wanting to be there.

*Consider:*

* How will your stepchild react to having you *and* their biological parent(s) at an event?
	+ If you’ve successfully attended events with “the other parent,” the stepchild may feel comfortable with you there. If there’s tension or hostility between you and “the other parent,” your stepchild will most likely pick up on it. It may help to start with smaller importance, less personal, or informal events and discussions and work your way up to the more important events and serious conversations.
* Will your presence detract from the discussion or event?
	+ In situations like school conferences and doctors appointments, the main purpose of meeting with the parents is for a person to effectively convey important information to the parents of a child. If your presence carries the potential to detract from the purpose of the meeting, you may unintentionally derail the meeting and do an injustice to your spouse, your stepchild, and the person hosting the meeting. As a stepparent, you can make invaluable contributions to your stepchildren’s lives; however, you must be mindful that the importance of what you do as a stepparent does not equate to the credit you receive for doing it. Cherish the internal and covert rewards of being a stepparent: **seeing how your influence has positively shaped your stepchildren.**
* Do I want to be here to support my stepchild or to assert my presence and the importance of my role?
	+ Being aware of any ulterior motives for wanting to be at a discussion or event helps to inform yourself of whether or not your presence may be helpful or harmful. If you just want to be there to show other people that you are in the family, to show off or cause tension with “the other parent,” or to be nosy, your presence is not likely to be helpful or useful in the situation.
* Do you actually want to be present at this event or discussion?
	+ One of the perks about being a stepparent is the small bit of distance you are granted as not being a biological parent. There can be some comfort in not always needing to take on the responsibility of a biological parent (like when making big decisions or joining an argument between your stepchild and their parent). Taking *no* role in making decisions or parenting does more harm than good, but identifying when you can take a step back and let the biological parent do their job - or even just having the option - can help relieve some of the pressure to perform. Don’t forget to continue supporting your partner if you do decide to take a step back from the situation; they typically need your encouragement, friendship, and input during this time. If you recognize the need for you to step back but struggle with letting go, consider that you may need to spend some time nurturing trust in your partner and their ability to parent.

But you know what the best part about creating a blended family is? *You* get to decide what your stepfamily looks like so that no one has to be on the outside. You and your partner get to take charge over helping the family create something new together that is unique to your family. Gently encourage the patterns and behaviors you like and learn to take pleasure in the process.

* Encouraging is better than demanding because demanding that children act like family when they don’t feel that way can lead to resentment.
* Exhibit an overall positive attitude towards your stepfamily.
* Avoid lectures about *how* you should treat each other and instead model and encourage how you believe others ought to be treated.
* Demonstrate inclusiveness, tolerance, and flexibility and forgive yourself when you can’t.
* Gauge what is the appropriate vocabulary for your stepfamily and when to use it. Children’s reactions to the words “step” or “family” can vary and can evolve over time.

New spouses aren’t the only ones vulnerable to feeling like an outsider; it can happen to children, too. When stepcoupling, you may need to examine your behaviors that seemed perfectly natural before. It is easy for a stepfamily to splinter into insiders and outsiders, so helping everyone feel like an insider is important for children to thrive and know that they belong.

* ***Same treatment ≠ best treatment.*** - Some stepparents try to treat all the children the same, regardless if it is their own children or their stepchildren. That can work...sometimes. When it comes to physical affection, everyone has a different comfort level and it is best to consider how affection might be received and proceed more slowly. You can take cues from your partner about how they are affectionate with their children to give you a guideline of what the kids are comfortable with, but honor your own comfort level, too. Conversely, some parents try to treat their own children with the amount of affection they are comfortable giving their stepchildren in an effort to treat everyone the same. However, this can be confusing for your biological children for the sudden decrease in affection and can impact your parent-child relationship.
* ***Needs vary depending on the person.*** - Developing different approaches to affection for each child in your home is okay, as long as the goal is to connect with everyone. Children at different levels of development may be more or less receptive to physical affection. Children’s individual needs for affection may vary drastically depending on their ability to process sensory information. Adult male stepparents may be reluctant to get physically close to stepdaughters and adult female stepparents may be reluctant to get physically close to stepsons. This can arise from the awareness of the possibility of sexual energy between unfamiliar adolescents and adults in close quarters.
* ***Physical touch is not the only way.*** - Physical touch is the most basic form of affection, but not the only way. Just like with a partner, there are many different ways to express love and to meet the needs of your children. The most common 5 [love languages](#_6u2mu4smvkad) are physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service. You can connect with your stepchildren by listening to them, spending time with them, keeping promises, praising them, physical play, or even maintaining eye contact or giving undivided attention when your stepchild is speaking. Which love languages do you tend to do? Which ones do you think your stepchild asks for? Understanding the other ways that you can love your stepchild can help connect you and build a safe bond.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Love Languages

# Married Life is More Semi-Charmed

You and your partner decided to get married and officiate this stepcouple and blended family. Congratulations!

But perhaps, real life is settling in now. The new relationship has lost its initial sparkle, kids and work compete for your attention, and it feels like something has come between you two that is causing distance. The truth is that sometimes, certain things about your partner will drive you crazy! The initial dating and honeymoon phase of marriage provides space for you to gloss over, minimize, rationalize, or overlook your partner’s less appealing characteristics. These characteristics may even have been what initially attracted you to your partner, but have now become a point of contention.

Married couples often like to think that once they are married, they know everything about their partner and can “relax” from putting effort into “dating” their partner or understanding their partner. **WRONG!** Just like your children, your relationship is constantly changing and growing and you need to continue to take care of it! To reiterate the [introduction](#_d8xpr0nblvfk), the key to a successful remarriage, blended family, and stepcouple is the quality and strength of a stepcouple’s relationship foundation.

* *Don’t panic*
	+ During this time of transition, the stepcouple may start to fear that something is amiss. You’re arguing over tiny, insignificant things that are being fueled by deep discontentment, so maybe you decide to throw your attention off the relationship and onto the children, your careers, social activities, and travel. As your relationship becomes more strained, your children may begin to feel the strain and start acting out, or act out more frequently and intensely. You may start to question your whole relationship and why you decided to marry again…... **STOP!** This feeling of estrangement is normal, but not fatal. Don’t panic when things stop feeling euphoric. Instead, refocus your attention on connecting back with your partner and strengthening your relationship.
* *Make an effort to strengthen your foundation daily*
	+ Do you believe that once you’re married, your time for dating is over? You thought wrong! Now, once you’re married, the dates may start to look different - less elaborate or less pressure to impress your partner. That’s okay. What most couples forget that they really need is you and your time, which can be achieved with a [Date Night](#_btun7wwrb02k). Work, kids, and life in general demand your attention nearly all the time, so receiving uninterrupted attention may be rare. The time you are able to spend alone with your partner, is an investment in your relationship to show that this is a priority. There is no set way that a Date Night should be, other than ensuring that you and your partner are connecting, giving each other undivided attention, and are not being interrupted. The rest is up to you! The sky's the limit! If you find yourselves struggling to fit in a date night every week due to busy schedules and time constraints, a 5-Minute Date Night may be your best alternative. You should still strive for a longer (like at least 1-2 hours) date night, but the 5-Minute Date Night can alleviate the time pressure by substituting one long date with 2 daily 5-minute dates.
	+ Think of your relationship as a bank. Many people’s goals in life are to have a large, comfortable bank account; but how do we get there? Like a bank account, a relationship has deposits (positive things that make us/our partner feel loved and supported) and withdrawals (negative things that hurt, disappoint, anger, or sadden us/our partner). In order to have a large bank account, you need to make many deposits. Sometimes, it can feel like your efforts aren’t being recognized or that you aren’t feeling loved. Using a [Love Bank](#_r6g1mom58a1) can acknowledge the ways you are trying to love your partner in a physical form and be an outlet to indicate there was a withdrawal. A Love Bank can also inform you of the ways your partner notices how you love them and puts to words the ways that your attempt to love them, your words, or your behaviors may make withdrawals.
* *Talk about the things that bother/upset you; don’t ignore them*
	+ Irritation over small issues reflect deeper tensions in the relationship. You may be yelling at your partner for not taking out the trash, but what you’re actually upset about is feeling like your partner disrespected you by not helping with the household chores. The actual root of what you’re upset about often gets projected onto a smaller issue and the opportunity for your partner to hear and understand what is upsetting you gets missed.

Tensions can also arise when blame is being placed on your partner. Sure, whatever happened may have been a result of their behavior, but discussing things with blame can destroy relationships. When blame is used in a conversation, your partner stops listening and hearing about how the situation negatively affected you and instead starts planning their defense to what you said. Being able to clearly and concisely express how a situation affected you without using blame or pointed language can encourage conflict resolution, rather than merely conflict. Thoughts and feelings play into how we shape our words, and instead of successfully telling our partners how we feel, we unintentionally end up blaming them. We often have trouble listening fully to what is being said when we feel as if we are being blamed or accused of something. Our ears turn off and we often begin to formulate a response or defense instead of listening to what is being said. Blame and accusation prevent effective communication from happening. In order to prevent that, try to speak from your own perspective and point of view using [I-statements](#_dzi9m77cluw) and provide stories from your past as needed. An I-statement uses the template “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation)” in order to clarify your feelings in a non-combative way. Once you’ve mastered I-statements, using [TANGO](#_q50rzn8uvu1v) is a good way to be able to express your feelings about a situation and allow your partner to summarize your feelings to show they’ve heard and provide their own response.

* *Be clear about what you need*
	+ Sometimes, your partner will drive you crazy when you’re trying to tell them about your bad day. You feel like they’re not listening because they aren’t giving you what you need from the interaction.

In regular conversations, you may have to preface your conversation with your partner about what you want to get from it: advice or a place to vent. Conflicts often arise in couples when one person is looking to vent, but their partner assumes they want advice on fixing whatever is happening. Or maybe one person is feeling stuck and wanting advice, but their partner is just listening and not providing solutions. In both situations, one person is unconsciously asking for something and their partner is attempting to love them by providing what they *think* their partner is asking for. It’s best to cut the confusion and be upfront: “I just need to vent for a moment…” or “Can you please give me some advice on this issue?”

* + In arguments, it’s important to pause and consider what you really want from this argument. Do you want to “win” by having your partner eventually concede to your position, no matter the cost? Do you want to “win the standoff” on who can be stubborn the longest? Do you want to make sure the other person is crying or hurting emotionally? Do you want to come to a healthy compromise with your partner about an issue? What do you really want? Being honest with yourself is a good step in figuring out what is causing arguments and tension
* *Words may sometimes fail us*
	+ A large part of therapy is grounded in the notion that words have weight and can express all of our inner workings. However, sometimes, words simply fail us. In couples that have difficulty expressing their feelings, coming up with the right words to summarize their emotions, or simply have volatile interactions revolving around words and semantics, activities like [Sculpting](#_d5cqgf5f2fu0) can have a profound impact. This technique nearly eliminates words in favor of body shapes and language to express our inner workings. The saying goes “a picture is worth a thousand words” and our bodies can create a picture that can say all the words that we might not know how to.

***Where do we even begin reconnecting?***

This may not be as simple as waving a magic wand, but it does not have to be difficult. Think back and ask yourself these questions:

* *How did we connect at the beginning?*
* *When was the last time we felt close?*
* *What did we used to do that made me feel close?*
* *What do I know is a deposit in my partner’s Love Bank?*
* *What do I know is a withdrawal from my partner’s Love Bank?*

If you’re still stumped, consider your [Warmth Virtues](#_tzia86dzo0at), utilize [CLEAVE](#_6npfu2y5bhzl) to improve your relationship bond, or try completing the [Love Languages](#_6u2mu4smvkad) questionnaire. The Love Languages quiz is a simple (but not comprehensive) assessment to help people figure out what makes them feel the most loved and supported, and also to give a clear indication of what they need to feel loved and supported. There are 5 most common Love Languages: physical touch, quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, and giving gifts. Sometimes, partners attempt to love their spouse by meeting the wrong Love Language. It happens; if you grew up in an affectionate household and love Physical Touch, but every time you show physical affection with your partner they cringe, you're not meeting their Love Language. They miss the cue that you are trying to love them and may instead perceive it as you annoying them. It’s also important to realize that the way you need to be loved may be different than the way you love others, or that how you love others can vary depending on your comfort with the person. Learning what your partner needs and striving to make sure you express love to them in a way they appreciate helps to bring you closer together.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Date Night

Love Bank

I-Statements Vs. You-Statements

TANGO Communication Skills

Sculpting Intimacy/Space in Office

Locating the Warmth Virtues in My Relationships

CLEAVE

Love Languages

# R-E-S-P-E-C-T!

While we all know that everyone *deserves* to be respected, respect in stepfamilies may not come naturally or instantly. Respect emerges when members of the stepfamily get to know each other and develop trust.

***Roadblocks to Respect***

\* Unspoken anger, resentment, grief, or fear that can manifest as rude or rejecting behavior.
\* Family members feeling uncomfortable communicating negative feelings
\* Drawing yours vs. mine battle lines: “Why can’t you control them?”

***Solutions***
\* Try to understand what lies beneath your stepchildren’s reactions
\* Consider the situation from their perspective
\* Discuss issues as a stepcouple openly and honestly
\* If you aren’t feeling respected, examine your own attitudes towards your stepchildren

\* Don’t be afraid to ask your partner for what you need; the more satisfaction and happiness you find in your relationship, the more tolerance and empathy you will feel for your stepchildren

Respect in families is often modeled by the parents’ (or stepparents’) behavior. Families are bound to disagree, but being able to disagree and still demonstrate a high level of respect for each other is a sign of a healthy relationship and stepfamily.

* *What language and courtesy do you model for the children in your stepfamily?*
* *How do you handle disagreements and misunderstandings?*
* *How do you and your partner want to handle disagreements and conflicts?*
* *Do you take rude or rejecting behaviors personally?*
* *Are you feeling insecure in yourself and/or your place in the stepfamily?*

It can be hard to accept someone else’s children, especially when they differ from your own. This process requires courage, patience, tolerance, and maturity. When partners become frustrated with their inability to control or influence their stepchildren’s behavior, they may exclude them emotionally, which can divide the stepfamily.

**How It Starts: What It Becomes:**

\* Initial “helpful” suggestions for changes \* Suggestions become demands and

 defiance arises from the stepchild

\* Comments to spouse about child’s behavior \* Complaints about child’s behavior

\* Comfort in relationship with spouse and child \* Tension in relationship with child and

 spouse due to the struggle between

 siding with partner or kin

\* Both spouse and child demand your support \* Cause rejection of one while

 supporting the other; line in the

 sand: me vs. them

Feelings of disrespect can arise when stepparents find themselves as the subject of negative stereotypes. A stepparent can be the most kind, well-intentioned, dedicated, and earnest and still have their stepchildren apply negative stereotypes.

*Why?*

* *Children may struggle to adapt to the family norms*. They may miss their former nuclear family and family dynamic, which can lead to anger and grief being displaced onto a stepparent. Many times, a child may also be angry at their biological parent but decide that they cannot risk emotionally alienating their parent.
* *Loyalty runs deep.* In some cases, stepchildren may not hate or have negative feelings towards their stepparent, but feel that they have to have or fake negative feelings towards them out of loyalty to their absent biological parent.
* *Children are still figuring out how to express their feelings.* Children aren’t born knowing how to understand and express their feelings in healthy ways. They require support, feedback, and compassionate corrective responses to their emotional displays. Have you seen children tease or be mean to someone they had a crush on or watched a child have a tantrum over being told “no”? These situations often cause big feelings that children have not yet developed a mental framework on how to respond to it. Being a part of a stepfamily or gaining a new stepparent is a brand new situation that they also do not have a mental framework for. Their fear, anger, sadness, and confusion is projected onto the new stepparent and they need the support and corrective feedback from trusted adults to shape a more appropriate response. Take heart that the negative stereotypes and negative feelings for you will be temporary as they learn how to understand their feelings, articulate their thoughts, and learn healthy ways to express their emotions.

*What should you do?*

**Don’t take it personally.** - Just because your stepchildren think negatively of you, doesn’t make it true. Even if some of the elements of their negative stereotypes ring true, they do not define you as a person or a stepparent. When you’re feeling insecure in your marital relationship, you may be more vulnerable to believing your stepchildren’s beliefs about you are true.

**Seek your spouse’s support.** - It is okay to ask for your spouse to support you during this time, but it is important to make sure that you ask for support without demanding that they change their children’s behavior. Biological parents should intervene if the behaviors persist or escalate into overtly hostile interchanges. Like listed above, demands can cause tensions in a marriage. Instead, ask for support by requesting reminders of the specific ways that you demonstrate qualities contrary to your negative label. Remind *yourself* about how you have whatever quality your stepchildren believe you lack.

**Set yourself up for success.** - Avoid putting yourself in situations where you can anticipate that your stepchildren might apply the negative stereotype. If they tend to make fun of you in front of their friends, give them space when their friends are over. It can feel discouraging, but take heart; as your marriage endures and the children adjust and mature, the labels will fade. If you find that you are prone to having more negative reactions with your stepchildren when your stress is high due to depleted self-control, a simple [Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd) can make a big difference in how you interact with others.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

A Coke and a Smile

#

# You’ve Got Style(s)

When stepcoupling happens, a new journey begins that challenges couples to learn how to navigate their differing personality styles. Stepfamilies and blended families bring unique challenges like figuring out how to parent and discipline your partner’s children, allowing your partner to parent your own children, and figuring out co-parenting dynamics in your relationship and parents outside of your relationship. All of those challenges require identifying your own parenting style.

When you become a parent, you develop a unique parenting style made up of a combination of what you learned from your family, the adults you respected and learned from in your youth, your friends and their families, the books you’ve read and movies you’ve seen, your cultural environment, and other things. Your parenting style gets shaped throughout your life as you pick up pieces that work for you and adapt them to your personality style.

After divorcing, some adults go through a period of trying new identity styles and ways of being in the world like adolescents do during puberty. This experimentation encourages them to experience a greater range of behaviors than they did during their marriage. Adults who recouple while experimenting with their new identity style may inadvertently be trying to build a relationship on unstable ground. The unstable ground may be made up of ***unresolved divorce issues*** (attraction to a new partner who is the exact opposite of your previous partner or seeking a partner with a style relatively similar to their ex-spouse) or perhaps ***classic hot-button conflicts*** (how each partner handles communication, parenting, and finances).

Just like personality and parenting, people also have characteristic communication and decision-making styles. Differing styles can be problematic for any couple, particularly when a couple faces increased stress from stepfamily hotspots. Pressure and anxiety can exaggerate your basic personality style and increase the tension with your partner.

**Consider:**

*When you’re upset or trying to solve a personal problem, do you want input from others? From whom?*

*Do you conceal the fact that you’re upset? If so, from whom? Your spouse? Your children? Your closest friends?*

*When you’re stressed, what can other people do to make you feel supported and safe? What makes you feel more upset?*

*When people you care about are upset, how does it affect you? What do you do?*

*How long have you made decisions on your own? Jointly?*

*Are you more comfortable making decisions alone or jointly? Would you like to become more comfortable doing either?*

*What kinds of decisions are you more likely to make alone? Jointly?*

*How important is your spouse’s input when you’re trying to make a decision? Are there some decisions that you are more likely to ask for input?*

*Are there some decisions about which you’d always like your partner to ask your opinion?*

*What kinds of decisions would you rather not be involved in?*

*Do you make choices because they* ***feel*** *right, or because you* ***think*** *they’re right?*

*Do you decide things impulsively or after considering all sides of a situation?*

Understanding how your styles are similar and different to your partner’s allows both of you to maintain some perspective during stressful or anxious times. Making exclusively solo-decisions could be an attempt to protect oneself and give oneself control or an attempt to avoid conflict and discussion by forcing their partner to deal with the decision that has already been put into action. Or, perhaps they are used to living and deciding independently or view solo decision-making indicates authority, maturity, or responsibility. Conversely, making exclusively team-decisions could indicate a partner who is afraid of making decisions due to low confidence or fear of making a mistake. Or, perhaps they value hearing their partner’s input, seek to strengthen the relationship bond by deciding together, or attempt to avoid conflict about a decision made by inviting their partner’s opinion. Gaining some perspective about your partner and how and why they make decisions can encourage compassion in your relationship.

Differing financial styles can cause significant strife in a relationship - particularly a stepcouple relationship. It’s not surprising that many stepcouples can struggle with the tension about whether, when, why, and on whom they spend the limited stepfamily financial resources.
***Why?***

* Stepcouples have a more complicated budget than first-families do because of child and spousal support or possible legal fees
* Stepcouples are more likely to include a partner that has drastically more income, assets, financial obligations, or debt
* People who recouple have already established a singular financial style that typically gets developed during your initial single and independent life, first marriage, children, divorce or death of your spouse, and an adjustment back to single life
* How a person handles money can reflect their confidence level: low confidence in their earning ability could have been influenced by poverty, a lack of job security, being downsized, disability, or a return to work after a long hiatus that leads to cautious spending. High confidence in their earning ability indicated by a substantial income could suggest more comfort in spending money, purchasing luxury items, or the occasional surcharge or overdraft fee
* When a child needs or wants money, financial stylistic differences in the stepcouple become obvious. When one spouse hands out money because they *have* more money, it perpetuates a power imbalance between adults with different incomes and assets. Many adults find it easier to reach into their pockets for their own children, but may hesitate or resent doing it for a stepchild. Fairness is an honorable goal, but not one that is always achievable when children move between households. Trying to differentiate finances according to the biological lines of children who live together can keep a stepfamily from melding. Even if a parent can’t ensure equal financial opportunities for their children because of the influence of other parents, they can take steps to ensure that the kids in their household are being treated fairly - even if it is only in their household.
* Explore your and your partner’s financial past. Your past experiences influence your present values and can help negotiate the rocky terrain of a conversation about finances. Discuss:

*As a child, were you privy to adult conversations or arguments about money? What do you remember about them?*

*What were the financial stresses on your family?*

*How was the money spent in your first childhood home? Whose needs took priority?*

*Were your parents frugal or did they enjoy spending money? What did you learn from your parents about saving money? About spending it?*

*How did you spend money as a child?*

*Did you save money as a child? Did you do it on your own or were you required to save money by your parents? How did you feel about saving money?*

*As a child, did you ever save up for an important purchase? What was that experience like for you?*

*Did your parents give money to charity? If so, what kind?*

*How did you receive money as a child? Though an allowance or by doing chores? Did your parents simply hand you money when you needed or wanted it?*

*If you’ve gone to college, how was it paid for? How did you feel about it?*

*Did your parents or anyone else ever bail you out of a financial mess? What did you learn from it?*

*What experiences after childhood may have shaped the way you feel about money? In your previous marriage, was money an issue? Did you fight about it?*

*If you were raised in a stepfamily, how was money handled? Did it feel fair to you? Do you handle money this way or differently?*

*What message did you or do you receive from the larger culture about money? What do you think the larger culture endorsed when you were a child? Has it changed over time?*

*What is most important to you to spend money on? Yourself? Your home? Children? Education? Vacations? Charity? Retirement?*

* It is important to have a factual discussion with your spouse about your income(s), assets, obligations, and goals coupled with a reflection on your own personal financial style. Discuss:

*Are you more comfortable with joint or separate checking accounts? Did you have joint or separate checking accounts in your first marriage? Did that work for you?*

*Who pays the bills now? Out of which account? How well does your bill-paying system work? How fair is it?*

*How do you decide what portion of the responsibility you each bear? Is the current burden of financial responsibility acceptable to both of you?*

*Do you know what you each make and spend money on, other than bills?*

*What do you know about the bills you each pay individually? Are you comfortable with what you know about all the financial dealings in your household?*

*Do you spend money on each other’s children or do you keep these costs separate? How often? Are there circumstances under which you do pay for your spouse’s children? What are they?*

*How often do you review the accounts? Is this frequent enough? Too frequent?*

*Is money a problem in your relationship? How do you address the conflict?*

*How and where should children get spending money? In your stepfamily, how much do you think they should get?*

*If children need money for something special, how do they get it?*

*In your opinion, should your children be given most of what they need/want or should they work for it? Under what circumstances would your opinion change?*

*How do you handle spending money for visiting versus residential children?*

*What happens in the other household regarding money and how does it affect your financial style? Do the children in your home get money from grandparents and other extended family members? How does this affect your financial style?*

*In your stepfamily, do children only get money from their biological parent or is money shared between stepparents and stepchildren?*

There are no right or wrong styles in a relationship; just what you are initially comfortable with versus what your partner is. In successful stepcouple relationships, both members can moderate their styles. They are also able to frame their life together in terms of what they have gained, rather than what they have lost through divorce and remarriage. Stylistic differences will likely happen in any relationship and can cause either tension and conflict or growth and compromise. The only way to avoid style conflicts is to marry yourself! That isn’t really an option, so it helps to remember:

1. **Focus on commonalities.** - Even if your styles differ significantly, focus on what you have in common and why you are together. Do you have the same goals? Helping to identify your similarities can improve partners’ perspective and navigate differences
2. **Styles are learned.** - Just like your style is learned, so is your partner’s. Learning about your partner’s stylistic differences and how they developed can enrich your own perspective. What can you learn from your partner’s style?
3. **Be willing to compromise.** - When stylistic differences occur, conflict can arise, but consider how important it is to you and your relationship to hold firm to your style. Can a compromise be made so that you and your partner can be halfway-happy? If you are someone who makes spur-of-the moment decisions, can you slow down enough to include your partner? If you are someone who takes a long time to carefully consider every possibility and decision, can you recognize that not every decision may require lengthy mulling over?
4. **Compromise *needs* to be mutual.** - If one partner just caves into the pressure from the other, the children will know that changes are being made in the family that their biological parent probably doesn’t support. If a change in style has been agreed upon, the biological parent must deliver the message clearly, calmly, and consistently. Not only should a change be agreed upon, but supported by the parent, too.
5. **Practice!** - Learning how to navigate conflict with your partner can be difficult, which is why practicing can make resolving big issues easier! After having a conversation with your partner, mutually select an area in which you disagree. ***Avoid selecting an area that causes the biggest blow-ups or that you clash over most frequently!*** Once you select an area, **temporarily disregard other areas of conflict.** (You want to be able to experience the rewards of reaching a compromise and solution. Slow and steady progress yields lasting results!) Begin brainstorming a variety of ways to do things differently with as many possibilities as possible without commenting on their merits. Consider reaching out to other couples for real-world examples of how to address an issue. Then, mutually choose a solution to “test-drive” for a few weeks. If it doesn’t go well, you’ll know quickly and refer back to your list to select a new solution. Over time, experiencing compromises and healthy conflict resolution with your partner can nurture trust and comfort within your relationship.
6. **Recognize when limits are surpassed.** - It’s important to recognize when you are no longer dealing with a strictly stylistic issue. Style conflicts should result in annoyance, surprise, or some anger, but not rage or hurt. That might be a good indication that further therapy is needed.

#

# “Us” Versus “Them”

In the beginning of a stepfamily, the ties that bind together the separate families are tenuous and vulnerable. Perceived fairness is an issue in families and the children in your household are bound to measure their experience against everyone else’s. Small things may easily divide a stepfamily into an “us” versus “them” battlefield where the family is broken down into biological family groups. if the stepcouple relationship isn’t strong enough to challenge it and bind the family back together, the battlelines become stronger and harder to break.

How you perceive that your children are treated in the stepfamily can influence your participation in the division. Sometimes it can feel like your own children get the short end of the stick too often. It is natural to feel biological protectionism, which is born out of loyalty and instinct, which makes the stepfamily more vulnerable to breaking along family lines and encourages each biological family to create emotional boundaries around themselves to maintain biological loyalty.

***How do we challenge this?***

1. *Remember that every stepfamily experiences some “us” versus “them” tension.*
2. *Challenge your negative impulses*
	* Avoid **regularly** protecting your children from the other members of the stepfamily because you are anxious, angry, or sensitive to how they’re being treated
	* Prevent yourself from constantly resenting your spouse for advocating for their children’s causes
3. *Strive to balance genetic allegiance with loyalty to the larger and more inclusive stepfamily by acknowledging differences and working towards defining what the stepfamily’s “us” looks like,*
	* By supporting or appreciating your stepchild in front of your own children can dramatically express the message that you are *all* a part of the same stepfamily.
4. *Recognize the reality and your biases*
	* Many parents feel like their children get the short end of the stick in the stepfamily. It’s true - they do. However, so do your stepchildren, because a stepfamily stick often has two short ends. Your desire to protect your kin can cloud your ability to see the short end that your stepchildren may hold.

Sometimes, you may feel pulled to choose between parenting and partnering and being torn between the two is not uncommon as both values vie for the top position. You may be considering “do I choose us and our relationship, or being a parent?” Attending your new relationship feels like short-changing your child, and paying attention to your child feels like your love life is being pushed to the side. You deserve to have both and in order to do so, you will need to clarify what is most important to you about each side.

* Try looking at why you feel pulled in both directions. It can help to explore the experiences, feelings, and beliefs that influence the level of importance you place on parenting and coupling, as well as reviewing your answers to the parenting questions in [Before Stepcoupling: What Now?](#_qyxm38n038eu)
* Clarify what your parenting values are. What parenting value is non-negotiable for you (e.g. family dinner, bedtime routines, tending to boo-boos)? What are you doing that has lost value as you’ve grown (e.g. checking homework for independent children, cooking from scratch, putting a reluctant child through a sport they don’t care for)? Redefine what being a parent includes for you and as you do that, you can create more room for your adult relationship.
* Quantify your intimacy and sexual needs and know what meets them. You can’t be expected to know what your partner needs for intimacy and sex; we’re not mind-readers. But conversely, they can’t be expected to always know what you need. Take time to understand what you need realistically and express to your partner what you need. Negotiate ways to meet the needs of both you and your partner.
* Talk to other couples who have experienced similar things. How did they resolve the conflict between parenting and partnering? What did you learn from them that you can adapt for your relationship?

***What do I do if my stepchild drives me crazy?***

Sometimes, your stepchild feels like they are the bane of your existence. You don’t get along and you can’t understand why you can’t Ask yourself:

* *Your stepchild won’t just “disappear.” If your marriage endures, they will be present. Is this tolerable?*
* *Are you willing to consider the possibility that you could have a different relationship with your stepchildren, even if they don’t change?*
* *Are you willing to focus on including, rather than excluding, your stepchildren?*
* *Are* **you** *willing to do something different and take the first step?*

One or more positive responses to these questions suggest a desire and motivation to succeed, which can fuel your progression towards a more amicable relationship.

1. **Defuse the situation. -** Focus first on the behaviors and feelings that you are in control of: your own. These, you can change immediately. Think back on your negative interactions with your stepchild. What are you doing? Yelling? Shaming? Losing control? Name calling? The first step in figuring out how to change the cycle is to learn how to walk away and calm yourself down.

If you are prone to big blow-up arguments, it can be helpful to utilize a [Time-Out](#_8etdgfuip7pc) to cool yourself down. First, you need to look inside to know what your [warning signs](#_io15a7sve25p) are physically, emotionally, and mentally at the start of an argument. Knowing these warning signs can cue your brain into realizing that you are emotionally flooding and are in need of a break. Time-out is a good technique to pause (not end) a conversation so that you are able to reconvene calmer and more ready for a productive conversation.
2. **Prevent yourself from nagging. -** The easiest trap to fall into is nagging. When you make a request and it doesn’t get done, you begin repeating it and repeating it in hopes that the more reminders you give, the more likely it will get done. In many situations, it does the opposite. If your stepchild has been ignoring you, leave a brief written request for the child. It still may not get done, but you will be able to prevent yourself from falling into the trap.
3. **Resist blaming or complaining to your partner. -** This is their child and when you blame your partner for their child’s behavior or constantly complain about the child’s behavior, it can drive a wedge between the two of you. The blame and complaints may put your partner into the position where they feel like they have to choose sides: their child or you. If you are looking for an outlet to vent your frustrations, try journaling, seeking individual counseling, or talking to a friend. Biological parents are recommended to stay out of the middle of an angry relationship between a stepchild and stepparent; if either comes to a biological parent, the biological parent should suggest taking their concerns to each other.
4. **Recognize that you have an issue with your stepchildren. -** Ask yourself why you are finding it so difficult to expand your boundaries and include them.
	* It can be a surprise to those who haven’t raised children how much patience and energy is required to take care of them. As a stepparent, if you are feeling fragile or insecure about yourself or your role in your relationship, you may be unable to offer patience and stability to your stepchild. You may also believe that the more energy your partner spends on their children, the less available they are for you. When this is the case, lean into the process rather than disengaging.
	* If you have experience raising your biological children, your commitment to parenting is inherently deeper than with a stepchild. If a parenting strategy does not work well for your biological children, you are more likely to try different approaches. Your willingness to give up figuring out the best parenting strategy may increase when dealing with your stepchildren. Children are not all the same and your stepchildren have a completely different background than your biological children. Be patient and creative to figure out what works best for them.
	* If you are having trouble managing a specific age range of your stepchildren, this may reflect a lack of tolerance or understanding for this age group. Adolescents and teens are prone to challenging authority figures, even their biological parents. Learning more about normal development and behavior during the child’s stage of development can help increase your awareness and subsequently, grace and patience for your stepchild.
	* When marrying into a family with an adolescent or teen that you do not get along with, you may be inclined to grin and bear it in order to “stick it out” until they leave the home. However, ***this strategy does not work.*** You end up suppressing your thoughts and feelings, which can come at a great cost to yourself and to the potential relationship with your stepchild. When you bottle up your feelings, you end up creating tension. Imagine a soda bottle where the soda is all the thoughts and feelings you are suppressing. Every time you push down your thoughts and feelings about a situation, the pressure builds in the bottle. Eventually, the pressure will cause the bottle to explode, which can cause emotional damages to everyone involved. Also, consider how you would feel if someone was just waiting for you to leave?
5. **Turn to your partner. -** When the kids are driving you crazy, turn to your partner to ground yourself. Draw on the strengths of your marriage. Remember why you chose our partner and focus on those pluses. Challenge yourself to find one genuine positive characteristic about your stepchild. If you stop looking at your stepchild as wholly bad or defiant or impossible, you open your mind to recognizing their other positive qualities.
6. **Stop competing. -** Another reason why you might be having trouble with your stepchildren is because you may be competing with your stepchildren for the “lion’s share” of your partner’s love and attention. There is room for all of you! Schedule some time with your partner *away* from the children and enjoy your special adult relationship. As you feel more secure in the permanence of your place in your partner’s heart and home, it will help you see that there is room for you and your stepchildren, too. The best way to schedule time with your partner is to plan weekly [Date Nights](#_btun7wwrb02k)! This is a fun opportunity to prioritize your relationship and connect with your partner, while giving each other your undivided attention. The pressure to compete with your stepchildren for your partner’s love and attention lessens when you know that you have planned time that is just for the two of you. If you find yourself needing a pick-me-up, consider incorporating 5-Minute Date Nights in the interim between your Date Nights.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Time-Out

Ways to Soothe Difficult Interactions With a Mate

Date Night

# Energy Supply and Demands

#

# People can sometimes be thought of as battery-powered machines: people have a limited supply of energy to get through their day and how they allocate their energy defines how much energy they have to give to their life demands. Negative interactions, stressors, and relationship issues require more energy than other things, and may divert energy away from other important areas. Another example could be the cup metaphor: each person is a cup with a finite amount of water. Different tasks and people throughout the day require different amounts of water to be poured out of your cup. However, those negative interactions, stressors, and relationship issues poke holes in the cup and energy leaks out. The more energy that leaks out, the less energy you have for daily activities, hobbies, positive interactions, and relationship-building.

#

# “Energy” is meant to represent the emotional power characteristics that allow you to nurture others and cope with stress. It can also sometimes mean the actual energy and motivation in your body to complete tasks. These emotional power characteristics may include:

# Attention Affection Caring Support Patience Love Flexibility Understanding Listening

#

# Healthy stepcouples are usually able to produce far more power than they need, which allows the additional energy to be poured into their children, extended family, jobs, ex-spouses, household tasks, pets, friendships, hobbies, etc. However, this does come with its own set of challenges.

# It is important to ensure that a stepcouple’s energy reserves are reasonably distributed across the whole system. Like stated above, people have finite reserves of energy and when there are increased demands, energy is diverted away from other areas. When an imbalance of energy persists, the whole system (children, jobs, former spouses - the whole kit and kaboodle) is stressed.

# The stepfamily system can also be stressed when the stepcouple is struggling. The issues in the relationship often consume so much energy, not much remains for anyone or anything else. Many times, children’s needs get sacrificed to the energy needs of the stepcouple. The converse can also be true, where the demands of the children take the forefront and the stepcouple relationship suffers in return.

1. Coupling and parenting tends to place more emotional demands on a relationship than any other relationships.

#

# *What causes energy drains?*

* Stressors like injury, illness, job loss, natural disasters, housing or money insecurity are often big culprits for long-term energy drains.
* People with high emotional energy needs may indicate internal conflict with unresolved emotional issues.
	+ Unresolved emotional issues are common to the human experience, but there is a limit. When an unresolved emotional issue echoes a black hole that sucks energy from not only themselves but also their partner and the other members of their family, it is a problem.
	+ In stepfamilies, children’s unresolved emotional issues typically present behaviorally and represent inexpressible anger, grief, hurt, or loss.
	+ Adults’ unresolved emotional issues in response to present issues may be demonstrated as silent anger, cold withdrawal, codependency, or mistrust and indicate unaddressed conflict. Adults often wrestle deeply with the lingering hurt and loss of previous relationships, which can drain energy and threaten the stability of a stepcouple and stepfamily.
	+ Remarried adults tend to wrestle with more unfinished emotional business than first-marriage adults. The unresolved issues from the past relationships can arise in the present because remarried adults bring along the unresolved baggage of their previous relationship. Until the unresolved baggage gets addressed, it ends up being an insidious energy drain on the couple’s resources.
* The past can influence the present. Previous emotional pain can present with current energy drains. Emotional pain can include emotional or physical abuse, trauma, neglect or abandonment, betrayal, or illness or death of a loved one. These experiences can cause deep emotional wounds that can often endure for years and affect emotional responses and relationships.
	+ Pain can also arise out of mundane events that have lingering negative effects because it may have been too difficult to cope with the initial experience. Many times, these experiences get buried so deep that you aren’t aware they exist until a circumstance or memory triggers it. A good indication that a painful experience has been triggered is when a present event triggers a response greater than or different from what the situation deserves.

***What can we do?***

1. *Identify Unresolved Issues*

Successful stepcouples are able to tell when they’re dealing with unresolved emotional issues. They typically present with highly reactive tensions such as raging, weeping, stomping, defensiveness, withdrawal, intense out-of-proportion emotions, or fight-or-flight responses. When there is unresolved emotional business in a relationship, the issue makes itself known by repeating maladaptive cycles and becomes the focus of the relationship. Due to the extremely personal nature of emotional business, people are often primed to defend themselves from the looming emotional pain and respond by lashing out at their partner for causing it.

1. *Know Who Needs to Resolve the Issue*

Successful stepcouples are able to understand that the partner who is experiencing the emotional issue is responsible for resolving it. Unresolved emotional business is established in a person’s history and played out in their relationship. When unresolved emotional business rises to the surface, it should not fall on your partner’s shoulders to change things so that you don’t feel uncomfortable, angry, or hurt. Your partner cannot take away your past or your reactions to it. It’s also important to understand that in every relationship, both partners bring unresolved emotional business.

1. *Establish a Strong Relationship*

In order to explore unresolved emotional business, stepcouples need a strong bond and foundation. They also are able to develop strategies to explore hot-button topics without escalating by establishing [ways to soothe themselves in difficult interactions](#_io15a7sve25p) so that insight and healing can replace negative reactions. When couples are able to identify how to soothe themselves, they are better equipped to have difficult conversations and do so with more confidence.

1. *Be Open to Change*

Having a willingness to change, being open, and being willing to risk exploring painful territory are important for successful stepcouples. Sometimes both partners will share these learned qualities and sometimes one partner will take the lead; regardless, these characteristics demonstrate the possibility for growth and peace. When people avoid processing their past experiences that include hurt and loss, they never change their negative relationship cycles. They typically have a history of relationships that started with close bonds that have been replaced with hurt, anger, resentment, rage, hostility, or alienation.

1. *Increase self-awareness*

The more stresses and other people’s issues that get introduced into the stepcouple, the more flexibility, generosity, maturity, and self-awareness is required. When developing self-awareness, it requires exploring and understanding the energy-consuming parts of your past. A variety of life events can indicate it is time to take an honest look at your life and your relationships.

***How do I find out what my unresolved emotional business is?***

*When do I feel most insecure or hurt in my relationship? Have I felt this way before? When? Do I remember feeling this way as a child?*

*When am I most anxious? Have I felt this way before? When? With whom? As a child?*

*When am I most angry? What provokes me? How did I express my anger? Do I lose my temper? Physically threaten or hurt people? Verbally abuse, degrade, or humiliate them? Withdraw? Who do I resemble when I’m angry?*

*In my relationship, when do I feel like a child - weak, insecure, incapable, powerless?*

As you become more aware of the past experiences that activate your feelings of hurt, fear, or anger, consider paying attention when they arise. When a strong emotional reaction occurs, you can usually respond in one of two ways:

1. **Emotions Run the Show** - When emotions run the show, they typically present with tears, angry words, withdrawal, lashing out, hostility, or anxiety. Reacting this way is familiar and the results are predictable...but they rarely change the situation. Usually, the pressure and resentment will build and build and conflicts increase.
2. **You Run the Show** - When you gain enough awareness about your typical response to observe it, you welcome the opportunity for growth. Try talking about it - doing this encourages vulnerability as you accept the risk of sharing your feelings with your partner. However, avoid suppressing your anger, tears, or sadness; the reason why your unresolved emotional business causes reactions is because your emotions haven’t been adequately expressed (not acted out) or addressed.

When stepcouples identify a child as the source of their conflict, the tension is usually not about the child. It often signifies a distressed adult with unresolved emotional business or a troubled stepcouple relationship instead. In unresolved emotional business, the more you are sure that the problem lies with someone else, the more that you can guarantee that you play a role in the stepfamily tension. Both you and your partner are bound to unknowingly act out an episode from the past. The reality is that stepcouple and stepfamily tension isn’t caused by just one person.

***What can I do?***

* Consider how your viewpoint, behavior, or responses might contribute to the conflict. By loosening your grip on your point of view, you are able to understand your role in the problem.
* Channel your fighting energy towards productive and constructive conversations for yourself, your stepcouple, and stepfamily.
* Avoid ultimatums, nagging, pleas, or manipulation to force your partner to change their mind. The only mind you can open is your own.
* Recognize that when you have unresolved emotional issues from your past, that until they become clear, you will subconsciously be drawn to people and situations that are bound to replicate your unresolved emotional issue. By being aware of the congruence between the past and present, you bring it into your consciousness and are able to diminish the power of the past.
* Understand that one partner with unfinished emotional business may blame their partner when they are stimulated by a situation. You symbolize someone from your partner’s past and temporarily, you and that person from the past occupy the same space in your partner’s emotional life. The emotions and blaming behavior tends to arise from past hurt and loss, so you have limited power to change your affected partner’s experience. When they demand more attention and affection to keep them from feeling angry or hurt, you are usually being asked to heal wounds you didn’t create. You are not able to undo their past, no matter how much you want to.
* Learn to forgive the hurts from the past or previous relationship. Forgiving a situation does not mean that it makes a negative or hurtful event “okay” or dismisses the face that a hurtful event occurred. However, regardless of whether or not a partner or a couple is ready for forgiveness, [forbearance](#_qyzes5ndxppq) can be an important first step in putting the wellbeing of the marriage and the family over your pain and anger. Forbearance is an exercise in choosing patience, acceptance, and the wellbeing of your marriage and family over lashing out in hurt or anger.
* Recognize that your response to your spouse’s pain can positively or negatively affect your relationship.
	+ Seek to understand and support your partner with awareness and patience
	+ Acknowledge their feelings of hurt, loss, or anger and ask if there are one or two specific behaviors that your spouse would like you to drop or adopt. If they request something you can’t provide, say so as lovingly as possible. A calm and supportive delivery shows that you care about your partner and are committed to the relationship, even though you don’t like the behavior
	+ Create a space for your partner to understand themselves and take charge of their experiences by avoiding participating in their roleplay of the past and allowing your partner to come to the decision freely and willingly to explore the roots of their unfinished emotional business. This usually occurs when your partner feels safe and confident in the relationship
	+ When your partner rages or acts out in inappropriate ways, clearly and calmly convey that your relationship deserves better as lovingly as possible
	+ Try not to take your partner’s intense emotions personally and keep your own emotions in check
	+ Apologize when appropriate and defuse the situation when needed
	+ Respect is important in a relationship, but especially when discussing emotion-heavy topics. If you tend to catch yourself in the middle of an argument with your spouse saying things that you don’t mean, saying hurtful things, or yelling/screaming, it may help to implement some basic [communication rules](#_vw4kv72qqc41). These rules are set up as a guideline to encourage respectful communication between partners. Typically, these include things like speaking respectfully from your own perspective, controlling the volume of your voice, avoiding assumptions and degrading remarks, and evaluating your emotional state to determine when a time-out is needed. When people feel respected, they are more likely to have productive conversations. If you and your partner are prone to having more negative reactions when your stress is high due to depleted self-control, a simple [Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd) can make a big difference in how you interact with your partner. Self-control is often depleted when glucose is low, so having a “coke” or a bit of sugar can help increase your capacity to listen, have patience, and have a positive interaction with your spouse.
	+ If you and/or your partner are prone to big blow-up arguments, it can be helpful to utilize a [Time-Out](#_8etdgfuip7pc). First, you need to look inside to know what your warning signsare physically, emotionally, and mentally at the start of an argument. Knowing these warning signs can cue your brain into realizing that you are emotionally flooding and are in need of a break. Time-out is a good technique to pause (not end) a conversation so that you are able to reconvene calmer and more ready for a productive conversation.
* Provide feedback or responses as compassionately as you can. The more that you are able to convey your love and commitment to your partner without allowing yourself to be drawn into their emotional business, the more likely they are to take the next step and engage in self-examination.
* Empower yourself in the relationship by understanding your partner’s unfinished emotional business. As you learn the triggers, onset, duration, and intensity, you also tend to learn how best to support your partner without being drawn into the conflict. You also can empower yourself with love as you use your strength and courage to embrace the paths that led to meeting each other and developing a relationship.
* Understand that “better” is a realistic goal of exploring unresolved emotional issues, rather than “perfect” or “fixed.” Core emotional fears (e.g. abandonment, betrayal, loss, feeling like you aren’t good enough) tend to emerge throughout your life and as you understand how they play out in your personal life, their impact can gradually lessen.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

Ways to Soothe Difficult Interactions With a Mate

Forbearance

Communication Rules

A Coke and a Smile

Time-Out

#

# Hot Spot Conflicts to Resolutions

The craziness of the new marriage has finally settled and things are feeling good at last. Relationships between you and your partner, you and your kids, and your partner and your kids are smooth and peaceful. You’ve nurtured your relationship, become adept at handling stress and conflict, become flexible in multiple roles, become more skilled at communicating and compromising, and you’ve deepened your trust in each other. Great!

But that doesn’t mean that the demands that you face have lessened. It is still possible for a hot spot to flare up or a button to get pressed. You’re better able to handle the stress, but do you know how to maintain the good when faced with the bad? Challenges like illness, finances, job loss, *a pandemic*, or children’s issues can threaten the equilibrium you’ve achieved. Stepcouples specifically may face challenges like the divorce/remarriage of an ex-spouse, custody and financial agreement changes, and the birth of new children.

Adults who have had a previous marriage end in divorce may often mistake that conflict leads to the inevitable end of a relationship. Remarried adults have experienced fault-finding and resentment at least once before, but know that that typically results in a dead end. However, the most important lesson for a successful couple to learn is that they can disagree, be in conflict, or even fight and still stay happily married. Healthy conflict in a marriage demonstrates two adults who feel anchored enough by their love, commitment, and connection to air their differences to each other. Mature stepcouples can accept annoying tendencies as a minor irritation in an otherwise satisfying relationship. Children whose parents have divorced also need reassurance that conflict doesn’t mean the end of a relationship or that something is seriously wrong. Knowing that conflict is a normal part of being in a relationship lowers the stakes in each argument, which allows them to focus more on the issue at hand instead of what the arguments mean for their marriage.

Partners who have learned why they disagree and are open to exploring and understanding their spouse’s life stories tend to be less tense in their relationship. They are also in a better position to minimize any tension with their children and stepchildren. When value conflicts happen in your home, the children know about your differences. They are usually perceptive enough to pick up cues from you and your spouse about the magnitude of these differences. For children, discomfort typically doesn’t come from adults’ value differences, but how they handle the differences. How you mediate your differences teaches your children about empathy, tolerance, and acceptance.

***How can we keep our hot spots dim?***

* *Understand the habits that irritate you.*

If you pay attention to your partner’s habits that irritate you, it can provide valuable information about yourself. Why is this habit so upsetting? What is this triggering in yourself? What do you need? Many times, the irritation with your spouse’s habit is a reflection of you being upset about feeling unsupported, ignored, or unheard. They’re also often the first spots that flare up when you are feeling upset or discontent.

* *Be open, honest, and clear about how situations are affecting you.*

Thoughts and feelings play into how we shape our words, and instead of successfully telling our partners how we feel, we unintentionally end up blaming them. We often have trouble listening fully to what is being said when we feel as if we are being blamed or accused of something. Our ears turn off and we often begin to formulate a response or defense instead of listening to what is being said. Blame and accusation prevent effective communication from happening. In order to prevent that, try to speak from your own perspective and point of view using [I-statements](#_dzi9m77cluw) and provide stories from your past as needed. An I-statement uses the template “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation)” in order to clarify your feelings. When you share stories behind your differing value positions, you can explore the differences with the goal of understanding each other’s point of view. Once you’ve mastered I-statements, using [TANGO](#_q50rzn8uvu1v) is a good way to be able to express your feelings about a situation and allow your partner to summarize your feelings to show they’ve heard and provide their own response.

* *Know your warning signs and take a break before you blow up*

If you and/or your partner are prone to big blow-up arguments, it can be helpful to utilize a [Time-Out](#_8etdgfuip7pc). First, you need to look inside to know what your [warning signs](#_io15a7sve25p) are physically, emotionally, and mentally at the start of an argument. Knowing these warning signs can cue your brain into realizing that you are emotionally flooding and are in need of a break. Time-out is a good technique to pause (not end) a conversation so that you are able to reconvene calmer and more ready for a productive conversation.

* *Respond to your partner respectfully and non-combatively*

Respect is important in a relationship, but especially when discussing emotion-heavy topics. If you tend to catch yourself in the middle of an argument with your spouse saying things that you don’t mean, saying hurtful things, or yelling/screaming, it may help to implement some basic [communication rules](#_vw4kv72qqc41). These rules are set up as a guideline to encourage respectful communication between partners. Typically, these include things like speaking respectfully from your own perspective, controlling the volume of your voice, avoiding assumptions and degrading remarks, and evaluating your emotional state to determine when a time-out is needed. When people feel respected, they are more likely to have productive conversations. If you and your partner are prone to having more negative reactions when your stress is high due to depleted self-control, a simple [Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd) can make a big difference in how you interact with your partner.

* *Own up when you messed up and come back to it with love*

When people experience difficult emotions, they tend to lean back into their comfortable communication styles in an extreme way. When communication styles differ, these extremes tend to push our partner further away. Strive to respond in a way opposite of your comfort level: if you’ve been withdrawn, reach out in simple ways like eye contact or a note explaining what’s going on for you; if you chatter nervously or push for discussion before your partner is ready, take some breaths and back off. After a big blow-up argument, it is important to come back together but if you come in too harshly or too strong, you could fall into another argument before you even begin your conversation. A better way to approach your partner is with a [Soft Start-Up](#_j0hli4ykc1gc). By starting with a soft start-up, you are able to approach your partner with love and care and create a setting for a constructive and compassionate conversation. A soft start up can also include an apology; apologizing for your role in the conflict can go a long way in beginning to repair the damage made by the argument.

* *Apologize.*

If you have any reason to believe that your behavior or words may have hurt your partner or children, own up to it and apologize. Sincere apologies have the power to mend a dented relationship, get out of your reaction pattern, and step into your partner’s perspective. Sometimes, saying “I’m sorry” doesn’t quite cut it, so it can help to have a few tips for a [good apology](#_kxio0zm3u9w5). Similar to love language, different people may also require different ways that they need to be apologized to. Understanding what your and your partner’s apology languages are can help mend any ruptures in your relationship.

* *Know when your opinion is needed*

As a stepparent, you sometimes have a unique outsider’s view on family issues and problems with stepchildren. You may also have strong opinions about how children should be raised and how families should look. Before offering your opinion or perspective on a situation, make sure that it is welcome. It’s usually best to ask your partner if they’d like to hear what you think; however, honor the fact that they might not be interested in your input. Focus on encouraging and empowering your partner and avoid blaming, lecturing, or giving unsolicited advice.

* *Keep things balanced*

In a healthy relationship, neither partner completely abandons their accustomed style on a normal basis. Each partner identifies one or two behaviors that most trouble the other and agrees to explore ways to create gradual change towards compromise. When things get heavy, it helps to have a good sense of humor.

* *Give your partner some grace*

Giving your partner grace can be a difficult task at times. [Grace](#_t406l425pc4j) can be considered an undeserved gift offered from one person to another and is given without expecting anything in return. When there is tension in your relationship, it can be hard to take the first step to forgive your partner. Even if you or your partner deserves condemnation, giving them some grace - or undeserved mercy - can make huge strides in beginning the process of repairing the relationship and demonstrating that you value your partner and your relationship more than holding a grudge, vindication, revenge, or punishment. It is important to note that grace does not excuse or dismiss mistreatment, but instead allows space for constructive remorse and reparation.

It’s important to know that it isn’t whether or not you fight; it’s *how* you fight. At the end of a healthy disagreement, no hurt feelings should remain, anger should have been dealt with, accountability has been shared, and you are as committed to the stepcouple relationship as ever. Ultimately, in order to best be in conflict and stay married is to fight, make up, and move on.

***How do we fight fair?***

* **Express anger with respect** - No matter how angry you are, avoid name-calling and blaming. Inflammatory remarks do nothing to clarify your issue and instead cause wounds that are slow to heal. Profanity can be perceived as offensive and sarcasm does nothing to help support your case. Exaggerated or dramatic wording can escalate arguments.
* **Stick to the issue at hand** - Focus on one issue at a time. Agree up front on what you are arguing about and avoid temptation to bring up past situations or events. When tensions are high, you may feel like everything that has upset you throughout your relationship is relevant to the current argument; however, too many topics and examples can muddy the conversation and digress the argument from the initial hurt. Try staying specific using I-statements without “black or white” language that leave no room for the in-between (e.g. always, never, etc.)
* **Check your intentions at the door** - It’s important early on in your stepcouple relationship to get your priorities straight: do you want to win the argument, to be right, or to heal the rift in your relationship? Reassure yourselves and each other that you are fighting to be close again, not further apart. Closeness after a fight can even occur if the issue is still unresolved. It is vital to talk about your own thoughts and feelings, not your partners.
* **Listen actively** -Make eye contact, give non-verbal cues like nodding your head to show that you are listening, and rephrase what your partner has said to check your understanding before you respond. This can be accomplished using simple techniques like [Simple Listen & Repeat](#_q8g79bp2nr95).
* **Take time-outs** - Time-outs can be a great way to catch yourself before you slip into an argument by looking for the warning signs. **It can also be a good tool to use while *in* an argument!** If you are too upset to continue, you’re straying off topic, or using hurtful language, it is time to take a time-out to calm down and refocus.

In addition to hidden hot spots, there may still be a bit of a power struggle that exists between ex-spouses and new spouses. It is tempting to compete with your predecessors due to a natural urge to want to establish your role and as a response to your insecurity in unfamiliar roles.

***This is another trap!***

Remember these things to keep yourself in check:

* *Rivalry always costs*

Rivalry can cost money, time, energy, and emotional reserves. These resources are wasted when you attempt to compete with a biological parent because you will never win. When you compete with your partner’s ex, you are asking your spouse to negate the value of their relationship with their past mate and put your stepchildren into the unfair position of choosing between adults.

* *You can’t undo the past*

Biology and history link parents and children, and no matter how dysfunctional you think a parent-child relationship may be, as a stepparent, it is not your job to loosen or intrude on their relationship. Direct your energy to the present, not fighting the past you can’t change.

* *Your negative opinions could be a projection*

It has been found that the weaker your relationship is with your stepchild, the more critical you might be of their biological parent. That insecurity in your relationship gets projected onto the other parent.

* *Don’t lose yourself*

It is easy to get sucked into competition and lose yourself. The rivalry tempts you to overdo your natural inclinations and give *more* instead of responding honestly. Going overboard can be okay, but when resentment arises from going overboard, it’s a good indication that you may be competing. Competing with the other parent takes away from your stepcouple relationship because you married to become a spouse, not the better parent. Shifting your attention to loving and being loved can increase your feelings of security and purpose, and the desire to compete decreases

* *Give your stepchildren what they* ***really*** *need*
	1. Modeling a healthy, loving adult relationship. - This can increase the likelihood of the children trusting the marriage, feeling safe, and learning how to make their future relationships endure
	2. Establish trust in your relationship. - When you respond authentically to your stepchildren, they get to see the real you and trust you. Trust is the foundation for building respect and affection.
	3. Give them permission to make a relationship with you. - As you respond honestly and develop a healthy relationship with your stepchildren, you give them permission to develop a relationship with you that can transcend merely what you can do for them or give them.

Recommended Hope Couples Approach interventions to use concurrently:

I-Statements Vs. You-Statements

TANGO Communication Skills

Time-Out

Ways to Soothe Difficult Interactions With a Mate

Communication Rules

A Coke and a Smile

Soft Start-Up

Seven Tips to a Good Apology

Grace

Simple Listen & Repeat

# Appendix of Hope Interventions

1. [Forbearance](#_qyzes5ndxppq)
2. [Psychological Needs Card Sort](#_7k5u8jnywxxf)
3. [Exploring Hurts from Family of Origin](#_m0jclilmuwcb)
4. [Simple Listen & Repeat](#_q8g79bp2nr95)
5. [Communication Rules](#_vw4kv72qqc41)
6. [A Coke and a Smile](#_3ocdfnstrzbd)
7. [I-Statements Vs. You-Statements](#_dzi9m77cluw)
8. [TANGO Communication Skills](#_q50rzn8uvu1v)
9. [Building a New Strength](#_jpa1st48arve)
10. [Date Night/5-Minute Date Night](#_btun7wwrb02k)
11. [Dreams](#_mpae6mf0zbs0)
12. [Time-Out](#_8etdgfuip7pc)
13. [Ways to Soothe Difficult Interactions With a Mate](#_io15a7sve25p)
14. [Soft Start-Up](#_j0hli4ykc1gc)
15. [Love Languages](#_6u2mu4smvkad)
16. [Love Bank](#_r6g1mom58a1)
17. [Sculpting Intimacy/Space in Office](#_d5cqgf5f2fu0)
18. [Locating the Warmth Virtues in My Relationships](#_tzia86dzo0at)
19. [CLEAVE](#_6npfu2y5bhzl)
20. [Seven Tips for a Good Apology](#_kxio0zm3u9w5)
21. [Grace](#_t406l425pc4j)

# Forbearance

If a partner is not ready to address forgiveness and reconciliation, then the focus of intervention can be forbearing. This can prevent revenge seeking. Defining what revenge behaviors are, identifying the temptations to seek revenge and contracting to engage in alternatives to revenge are some of the sub-goals within counseling. This intervention teaches the concept of forbearance as a relational virtue.

*Step 1: Discuss with the couple that there are many options for addressing hurts in relationships, even if they are not interested in forgiveness or full reconciliation work at this time.*

* With a slight alteration (i.e., discussing fictional offenses), you could use this intervention with enrichment couples to prevent future grudge-holding.
* Define forbearance.
**Forbearance -** the decision to restrain emotionally driven negative expressions of hurt or anger for the sake of the relationship or family. Forbearance involves acting kindly toward the other person. It does not show anger, anxiety or distress over the other person’s wrongdoing. It involves patience and acceptance in difficult circumstances.
* Ask the partners whether they are interested in increasing their forbearance.

*Step 2: Partners engage in thinking about, reflecting on and reading about forbearance during the week.*

* (In spiritually integrated treatment) They might find that Scripture recommends forbearing at times (e.g., Eph 4:2; Col 3:13). In collectivistic cultures (such as that of the New Testament) forbearance is normative. That is, if someone were as confrontative as the typical person in the United States, the personal anxiety and social rejection would have been extreme. In the United States, we can think of forbearance as being restrictive, but it is advocated by Scripture. Partners can journal about forbearance as a strategy for handling hurts. They can engage in acceptance-oriented cognition such as, “This offense has already happened. We cannot go back in time and undo it. It is important to accept that it has happened.” The serenity prayer may be helpful for some people. Accepting that their partner is human with faults may be helpful in forbearing also. Focusing on one’s own faults or contributions to the offensive situation may be helpful. Some partners might find it helpful to work on increasing their distress tolerance in general through cognitive or relaxation exercises. Interventions relevant to “radical acceptance” from the dialectical behavior therapy tradition (Koerner, 2012) may also be useful for this step. There are numerous radical acceptance worksheets or interventions available through therapy textbooks or online.
* (In secular treatment) In the United States, the average person finds it relatively normal to express negative emotions to negative events and be confrontative about a hurtful or unjust situation. It is also true that while this is normative, many people struggle with expressing negative emotions due to individual upbringing, personal trauma, or negative societal stereotypes and with initiating confrontation due to anxiety or fear of rejection, emotional or physical escalation, or further negative outcomes. These concerns hold people back from advocating for themselves and expressing their emotions, but in the long run, causes more problems. Forbearance, while potentially seeming restrictive, is actually a good use of acceptance to encourage catharsis about a hurtful situation. Consider the Serenity Prayer used in many support groups: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” This does not dismiss the negative situation or how it affected that person, but instead encourages accepting that it has happened and that the focus should now be on moving forward. Forbearance encourages patience and acceptance when anger or distress would be easier but harmful to others in your life. Focusing on one’s own faults or contributions to the offensive situation, working on increasing their distress tolerance through cognitive or relaxation exercises, and learning interventions relevant to “radical acceptance” from the dialectical behavior therapy tradition (Koerner, 2012) may also be useful for this step.

*Step 3: Process the experience of forbearance with the partners.*

* Discuss how this might be like building a muscle where practice will increase their strength in virtue, but extreme circumstances or stress might wear out the “muscle” of forbearance and cause it to fail. Partners can identify stressful situations in which they might be likely to give up on forbearance and end up in a less healthy place in their relationship.

**Radical Acceptance of Relationship Offense Worksheet**

What offense are you focusing on?

What specifically about the offense is hard for you to accept?

What part of you makes it hard to accept the offense?

Practice accepting that the offense happened without overwhelming negativity. You can do things like:

* Relaxation, meditation or prayer
* Use the parts of yourself that find it easier to accept the offense to persuade the part that is having the hard time accepting it not to split yourself into separate parts but to be a unified whole person
* Write out some alternatives to not accepting the offense. For example, you could write, *It just is what it is*.
* Read inspiring writings such as positive quotes, encouraging stories or Scriptures.
* If you start to feel strong anger, resentment or other negativity, tell yourself, This is not good for you, your relationship or others in your life who depend on you. Replace the negativity with something positive to think about.

What did you do this week to work on accepting what has happened?

# Sharing Psychological Needs Card Sort

#

# The counselor works with the couples to explore what they need in their relationship. Couples use an assessment of their personal relationship needs by completing a card-sort activity. Each partner receives a set of cards with various psychological needs on them. They sort the cards into three categories. The first category is “*absolutely essential, this defines what our relationship is about”* or “*necessary for my relationship.*”The second category is “*very important to me”* or “*important for my relationship, but not necessary*,” and the third category is “*somewhat important to not important”* or“*not as important for my relationship*.” After the partners have each sorted the cards, they can look at each other’s card sorts and discuss them. Finally, the counselor asks the partners to select a few of the needs that they would like to focus on as part of their goals in working on their relationship. Or, you can challenge the couple to narrow down their top needs after the initial sort by asking them to narrow the “*absolutely essential/necessary”* category to 3 cards and the “*very important/important but not necessary”* category to 3-5 cards.

***Processing.*** This type of exercise is intended to be grist for the mill as they discuss their relationship needs and how to meet them. Similar to previous interventions, the counselor coaches the couple to consider whether they need to, at least partially, be met elsewhere. For example, the need for approval is normal and healthy but can be met at work or through hobbies as well as in their relationship. This exercise brings the couple closer together as they understand each other more. It is particularly good for couples who are newer in their relationship, or for those who have begun to lose touch and need to reconnect.

One of the counselor’s jobs is to help make the experience a “soft” one. Partners should not feel criticized or put down during the card sort. Needs should be discussed as normal and natural parts of relationships. It should be considered normal that not all of their needs will be able to be met by their partner.

This card sort is a springboard for discussing the meaning behind their expression of their needs in the relationship. By doing the activity as a card sort the session is more active and memorable for couples. The card sort activity is one that has proven effective and interesting to engaged couples. This intervention may also be helpful for clients who have difficulty articulating their needs because the card sort gives them various relationship needs and they simply sort the cards by level or perceived need.

| *Acceptance, the need for approval*My partner to approve of me | ***Acceptance, the need for approval***My family to approve of our relationship | ***Acceptance, the need for approval***My friends to approve of our relationship | ***Family, the need to raise children***To raise current or future children with my partner |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex***To have passion in my life | ***Romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex***To have sex | ***Social contact, the need for friends (peer relationships)***A lifelong friend through our relationship | ***Social contact, the need for friends (peer relationships)***To have friends or a community we spend time with |
| ***Tranquility, the need to be safe***To know I am safe with my partner | ***Tranquility, the need to be safe***For us to have a peaceful relationship | ***Eating, the need for food***To provide for basic needs (food, shelter, essentials) | ***Saving, the need to collect***To save for the future |
| ***Social status, the need for social standing/importance***To have the social position of being married person/in a relationship | ***Idealism, the need for social justice***To have fairness in our relationship | ***Idealism, the need for social justice***To have the two of us address issues or problems with our relationship | ***Power, the need for influence of will***To have some control over what happens in our lives |
| ***Vengeance, the need to strike back/to win***To be right about things in our relationship | ***Vengeance, the need to strike back/to win***To give a good argument in a disagreement | ***Independence, the need for individuality***To have autonomy/independence | ***Independence, the need for individuality***To be an individual, apart from our relationship |
| ***Order, the need for organized, stable, predictable environments***To have the stability found in long-term relationship | ***Order, the need for organized, stable, predictable environments***To be able to predict the future because I know who my partner will be | ***Honor, the need to be loyal to the traditional values of marriage of one’s reference group***To honor the values of marriage passed on through my religion | ***Honor, the need to be loyal to the traditional values of marriage of one’s reference group***To honor the values of marriage passed on through my family |
| ***Acceptance, the need for approval***My partner to approve of me | ***Acceptance, the need for approval***My family to approve of our relationship | ***Acceptance, the need for approval***My friends to approve of our relationship | ***Family, the need to raise children***To raise current or future children with my partner |
| ***Romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex***To have passion in my life | ***Romance, the need for romantic fulfillment and sex***To have sex | ***Social contact, the need for friends (peer relationships)***A lifelong friend through our relationship | ***Social contact, the need for friends (peer relationships)***To have friends or a community we spend time with |
| ***Tranquility, the need to be safe***To know I am safe with my partner | ***Tranquility, the need to be safe***For us to have a peaceful relationship | ***Eating, the need for food***To provide for basic needs (food, shelter, essentials) | ***Saving, the need to collect***To save for the future |
| ***Social status, the need for social standing/importance***To have the social position of being married person/in a relationship | ***Idealism, the need for social justice***To have fairness in our relationship | ***Idealism, the need for social justice***To have the two of us address issues or problems with our relationship | ***Power, the need for influence of will***To have some control over what happens in our lives |
| ***Vengeance, the need to strike back/to win***To be right about things in our relationship | ***Vengeance, the need to strike back/to win***To give a good argument in a disagreement | ***Independence, the need for individuality***To have autonomy/independence | ***Independence, the need for individuality***To be an individual, apart from our relationship |
| ***Order, the need for organized, stable, predictable environments***To have the stability found in long-term relationship | ***Order, the need for organized, stable, predictable environments***To be able to predict the future because I know who my partner will be | ***Honor, the need to be loyal to the traditional values of marriage of one’s reference group***To honor the values of marriage passed on through my religion | ***Honor, the need to be loyal to the traditional values of marriage of one’s reference group***To honor the values of marriage passed on through my family |

#

# Exploring Hurts from Family of Origin

The couple spends time exploring patterns of hurt from their families of origin and how those patterns might affect their current relationship. This shift in understanding creates a space where the couple can better connect with each other, reduce defensiveness and increase understanding.

***Counselor’s role.*** The counselor actively seeks ways to connect the stories of hurt between the partners. While the content of the stories may be different, the process is often the same. There is often one or both parents that failed to meet needs. The parent might have been harsh, punitive and negative. Or the parent might have been neglecting, distracted and preoccupied. As a result, children and adolescents may feel insecure, unloved or unimportant. This feeling can carry over into adult attachments. If the counselor understands the partners’ attachment styles, then some expected patterns will emerge. Most people blend more than one attachment style in their adult relationships, but they tend to have one predominant type.

***Attachment style applied to family of origin.***
*Avoidant type.* People high in avoidance may believe that their needs will not be met regardless of what they do. Typically, only a few childhood needs were met, and parents may have overemphasized the avoidant child’s independence. Avoidant people often long to have someone interested in their inner needs and desires but are afraid to take risks to meet that longing.

*Anxious type.* Anxious people may seem unpredictable. Sometimes it seems impossible to meet their needs. As soon as it seems that needs are being met, these people become anxious about ever getting their needs met or new needs arise. It is helpful for anxious people to reflect on unmet needs from childhood and move toward accepting the losses of living in an unpredictable or chaotic household.

*Disorganized, neglected and abuse backgrounds.* Adults with these backgrounds often have difficulty coping. They lacked mirroring experiences in childhood and so often have difficulty understanding their own interior needs. They might have difficulty understanding that their partner, children, counselor or others have an interior life and needs. Not everyone who had an abused or neglected childhood has a disorganized attachment style. Many people are resilient, and many parents at times provide some nurture even though they abuse or neglect their children at other times.

***A word of caution.*** Some partners tend to dismiss their partner’s childhood wounds and needs. Before engaging in this intervention, be aware of this possibility and assess whether this is an issue for the current case. If a partner is likely to be dismissing, then this intervention may harm the relationship.

# Simple Listen & Repeat

This intervention is the most simple communication skill. It is useful when there is limited time or when the couple has limited abilities. It can be the building block for more complex skills.

This exercise works best if the counselor helps the couple select a manageable topic. Something they feel “hot” about should be avoided so that they can learn the skills. (Just as you would not try to learn to shoot and play defense against LeBron James!) In fact, this works best if the topic is some stressor, concern or decision relevant to a part of their life *other than their relationship*, such as stress at work.

***Speaker.*** Designate one person as the speaker and one person as the listener. The speaker talks about something he or she wants the partner to know about him or her. The talking should be between one and two minutes. There are some rules for the speaker. Sometimes, if you have partners create their own rules, the rule-making process can be an effective intervention itself. Couples can even make a reminder card of their rules with a simple piece of cut cardstock and a magnet to keep on their fridge. Creating the magnet significantly helps the rules be more “sticky” or memorable for the couple during the week and into the future.

***Listener.*** The listener’s job is to listen for what the partner is really trying to say to them. Then they repeat or reflect back what they hear, like a mirror. If sharing talk time is difficult for the couple, then an object can be held by the listener and exchanged as they change roles (e.g. the rules card, a stress ball, or anything handy that would not cause damage if thrown!).

*Example rules for the speaker:* Speak the truth in love. Whatever is said should be both true and loving. No criticising, no refusing to talk, no blaming, no putting the other person down and no yelling.

*Example rules for the listener:* Be slow to speak and quick to listen. Do not interrupt., no nonverbal negativity, look at the person and try to understand their way of seeing things.

Simple Listen & Repeat

Speaker

* Talk about something he or she wants the partner to know about him or her
* Talking should be between one and two minutes
* Use I statements
* Try to avoid using absolutes (e.g. always, never)
* Do not refuse to talk
* Do not blame, criticize, or put the other person down
* Keep voice at normal volume
* Follow agreed upon communication rules

Listener

* Allow the speaker to complete his or her turn without interruption
* Look at the person and try to understand their way of seeing things
* Repeat or reflect back like a mirror as they share
* Be aware of your nonverbals and avoid negative nonverbal behaviors (e.g. crossing arms, avoiding eye contact)
* Follow agreed upon communication rules

# Communication Rules

Couple communication is like horse racing. It can be exhilarating and enjoyable to communicate with your partner and find your understanding and connection racing ahead. But, when it goes badly, someone can be injured.

Couples need to create rules, boundaries and expectations for communication in their relationship. This is particularly true when the discussion becomes “heated” or difficult. If feelings of anger, righteous indignation or sadness rise up during a conversation, then it is more likely that the rules of the game will be broken and injuries occur.

Think of communication rules for your relationship and write them down. Many couples have never articulated what they need when they are having a difficult conversation. Try to use “I” statements, make direct and respectful requests for rules, and work together as a couple in rule-making. In this way, you are practicing good communication at the same time that you are discussing the topic of communication.

Questions you might ask include, “What do you need to happen in communication to help things go well?” and “What do you need both of you to avoid doing to prevent the conversation from going awry?”

How this intervention can go wrong: Things go badly when you veer towards “the kitchen sink” conversation, reminding each other of all of the negative things they have done in previous fights. Couples with high conflict may struggle with this intervention and need more support and active intervention on the part of the counselor. If things are heading that direction, your counselor can coach you towards good communication by asking you to observe how the current conversation is going. Notice each other’s non-verbal responses, voice tone, and discuss your intent in the conversation.

One advantage of creating your own rules is that it is difficult to break your own rules. For many couples, there is a “win at all costs” mentality in conflict or difficult communication. Sometimes just creating the rules will bring that attitude to light, allow both of you to reflect on it and make more intentional choices about your communication.

**Creating Communication Rules**

In this exercise you as a couple design your own communication “rules” to help your communication work better. Communication for a couple can be most effective if you use a few rules. They should be simple and realistic for you both to consistently keep the rules. And if the rules are broken, the couple should stop communicating for a break or “time out” until they can establish safety again using their rules.

Example Communication Rules:

1. Each person can only speak from their perspective.
2. Each person should avoid making assumptions about the intentions behind their partner’s words or behaviors.
3. There will be no devaluing of each other while in the therapy room.
4. Volume of speech must be kept to a 5 (out of 10) or below.
5. If a person feels the need to take a time-out, they may do so. The partner must respect the person’s decision to take a time-out and may not engage the person until they are ready.

Your rules:

# A Coke and a Smile

This intervention communicates how self-control is a “muscle” that can be depleted when glucose levels are low or stress is high. Couples identify times in their weekly routine when they are more likely to have negative interactions due to lack of self-control. Couples then identify skills and strategies to manage their high-risk times.

The research on the virtue of self-control has blossomed in the last ten years. There is now detailed psychological information on how people use, or do not use, their self-control. The research supports the theory that self-control is like a muscle (Cacioppo, Bianchi-Demicheli, Frum, Pfaus & Lewis, 2012). If you do not use self-control and never exercise it, then it will atrophy and you will not have it when needed. On the other hand, if self-control is taxed too much in a short period of time, then it becomes exhausted (or ego-depleted) and there will not be much energy for self-control later. If we are tired, feel stressed or are fatigued, then our usual self-control might fail us. At the least, when we are ego-depleted, exerting self-control will be even more exhausting. There is actually research indicating that a little bit of sugar (like a Coca-Cola or a fruit) can help a person with self control tasks (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007).

Anyone on a diet understands this. Early in the day (or the first week of a diet), when self-control is higher, it is easy to turn down a sweet or fatty snack. It feels good to beat the temptation. However, if the self-control muscle is fatigued after a day of turning down yummy, sweet snacks, then in the evening the person is more likely to give in to their desire for an ice cream cone.

The application of this psychological finding is to help the couple identify times that are best to address difficult issues, make big decisions or solve a problem together. Many couples have very little regulation of their disagreements. They seem to “bleed out” in the relationship at any time. Part of what makes for a wise couple is that they find a way to contain their disagreements. They do not tackle the mother-in-law issue on an empty stomach or when exhausted. So help couples find their sweet spot for productive discussions.

***Step 1:*** *Use psychoeducation about self-control and about being wise or judicious in selecting when to discuss difficult topics or make important decisions as a couple.*

***Step 2:*** *Ask the couple to discuss times that are good—and not so good—to talk about difficult things.* The counselor can list these for the couple using a two-column method.

***Step 3:*** *Ask the couple how they might implement this two-column discussion in their life even this week.* (If it is appropriate, this might also be a good time to discuss whether their counseling is most effective if they come to sessions depleted.) This is also a good time to discuss general self-care as one avenue for improving their stress. This can have a spillover effect into their relationship. For couples with high levels of stress, this optional add-on can help make a big difference in reaching their goals more efficiently.

**A Coke and A Smile**

Step 1: Psychoeducation about self-control and being wise when selecting when to discuss difficult topics or make tough decisions

* Self-control is a “muscle” that can be depleted when glucose levels are low or stress is high
* Have couple identify times in their weekly routine when more likely to not have self-control which can cause negative interactions
* If tired, stressed or fatigued, then usual self-control may fail
* Research suggests that a little bit of sugar (like a Coke or fruit) can help a person with self-control tasks
* Help couple find sweet spot for productive discussions

Step 2: List times that are good and not good to talk about difficult things. Right down list into two columns

Step 3: How would this impact your week? How can you implement these two columns? Discuss self-care

# I-Statements Vs. You-Statements

An I-statement is a way to express our feelings about a situation using the template “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation),” or “When \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (situation) happened, I felt \_\_\_\_\_\_ (emotion). However, this rather simple concept can easily become ineffective when we use a roadblock. Roadblocks include Assumptions Instead of Experience, Pointed Language, and Thoughts for Feelings. Here, we will practice how to transform ineffective I-statements to effective I-statements.

***Example:*** “I feel like I am the only one who cleans the house.”

Think about how you might feel if your partner told you this. Probably hurt and defensive. Most people would immediately begin thinking of a defense to give for this statement, providing all the times that you’ve cleaned recently or the times that your partner hasn’t. When we switch from listening to forming a defense for a blaming statement, we totally miss the point of the original I-statement - that our partner is hurting. We make it about us instead of about our partner.

***New I-Statement:*** “I feel hurt and disappointed when I don’t get help cleaning the house.”

Roadblocks are things we say that prevent us from communicating our feelings effectively.

* *Assumptions Instead of Experience*

***Example:*** “I feel like you don’t care about helping the kids get ready in the morning.”

* The statement focuses on what we’re assuming (intention, other’s feelings, others’ thought process, roles in situations) about the situation, rather than what made us feel it.

***New I-Statement:*** “I feel frustrated and stressed when I have to get the kids ready for school on my own.”

* *Pointed Language*

***Example:*** “I feel angry that you were too lazy to take the trash out.”

* + Using “you,” “he/she/they,” names, or “*someone*” can point a blaming finger, which reduces the chance of your partner listening to the I-statement.

***New I-Statement:*** “I feel angry that the trash didn’t make it to the dumpster.”

* *Thoughts for Feelings*

***Example:*** “I feel like you don’t listen to what I have to say and I have to say things over and over again.”

* + Using “I feel,” but describing a thought instead of an emotion word. “I feel like you…” is not an emotion statement. What emotions (use the [Feelings Wheel](https://www.loyola.edu/-/media/department/counseling-center/documents/emotional-feelings-wheel.ashx?la=en)) have arisen from the situation?

***New I-Statement:*** “I feel ignored when I have to repeat myself.”

**Practice:**

“I feel like you don’t listen.”

* Think of a time when you had to say that. What emotions came up? How might you rephrase this to share your own experience without using the roadblocks?

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“I feel like you never do the dishes and I always end up doing them. I work too hard to come home and have to do the dishes, too.”

* This I-statement is a little longer and has a lot of underlying feelings in it. How might you transform the sentences to talk about the situation and how it affected you?

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“I feel like you don’t care when I get a haircut. You never say anything about it.”

* Think about how you feel when you change your appearance or wear a new outfit. Imagine your partner made no comment about it. How might you express your feelings in a way that your partner will be more likely to hear it?

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# TANGO Communication Skills

This communication skills exercise involves a speaker-listener technique to improve communication. It is one step up in complexity from the simple listen and repeat in that it gives directives on what the speaker and listener should say. This intervention was originally inspired by the Communication Wheel (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Miller, Wackman, & Nunnally, 1983), which also inspired the STEPS intervention in the last Hope focused book (Worthington, 2005). TANGO has been researched as a part of the Hope-focused Couples Approach in clinical studies at Regent University and has been reported on an exit questionnaire to be the most well-liked intervention (Ripley, et al., 2013). In qualitative follow-up interviews, some couples reported that they continue using the actual 5-steps of the TANGO; however, most work to incorporate the principles of the technique more naturally.

The TANGO is a method of teaching communication skills that helps people understand each other’s meanings. It teaches couples to use a script for good communication to guide what to say. However, *the specific steps for the intervention are not the important part of the intervention*. What is important is that the couple learns the principles for good communication. Therefore, clinicians should not concern themselves with the couple being good at following each step, but in being able to incorporate the principles naturally into their relationship. Personal virtues can be used to help the couple focus on positive interactions and behaviors.

*Step 1: Review the “rules” for TANGO.* These are actually principles for good communication. They are:

* Take turns talking.
* Really listen to your partner, and do not just think of the next thing you’ll say.
* Slow down the conversation.
* Infuse difficult conversations with loving statements.
* Do not make assumptions; make sure you understand each other.

*Step 2: Coach them through the steps.* To coach them through the technique, everyone should stand up, which involves gross body movement rather than merely talking. People retain more when more modalities are employed. We have found that many couples need the clinician to role play how to do the TANGO parts of the exercise so they can succeed at it in a brief training time.

Help the couple choose a topic. It should be a topic that is something they really do need to communicate about but not something that will cause them to emotionally flood. The selection of the topic is very important and can cause the exercise to be effective if selected well or ineffective if too “hot.”

As a coach, the counselor should

* Step in and assist but not be controlling or ever put the couple down for their difficulty learning to communicate.
* Encourage them to state things simply and with care in their voices and nonverbal behaviors.
* Note how they feel when they are listened to.
* See if this feels better for them than their usual communication at home. Ask them what, in the TANGO, helps them communicate well.
* Say that this is to help them learn the elements of good communication. Emphasize that once they are comfortable with the method, they will just employ the principles, not the artificial elements of the method.

*Step 3: Once coached, have the couple practice communicating using the TANGO on their own for 8-10 minutes.* Video record them if you can. Then stop them and review how well they felt they did the skill. It is often helpful to have a printed card or magnet to give them with the 5 steps and 5 rules from the TANGO. A copy of this can be downloaded and printed from [www.hopecouples.com](http://www.hopecouples.com)

*Step 4: Context.* Discuss times in their relationship when they might need to use the TANGO in all of its detail. Typically this might be when there is going to be a difficult conversation, something that has been hurtful in the past, or if they are feeling disconnected from each other. They can reflect on how the exercise of doing the TANGO created a situation where they were able to communicate with each other better than they had in the past.

*Step 5: Homework.* Encourage the couple to practice the TANGO daily at home for 10-15 minutes. Help them consider times and places where it might be convenient to use it—for example, in a car ride, over a meal, or during a quiet moment in the evening.

**TANGO**

Rules for the TANGO

* Take turns being the leader of this dance. Only one listener and speaker at a time
* Be brief when you’re the speaker. problem. Just work to understand the other person’s perspective, feelings, and hopes for the issue.
* If either of you feel emotionally flooded(“**Flooding**” is the extremely uncomfortable feeling of being overwhelmed **mentally** and **emotionally**), take a break and cool down.
* Affection, valuing statements, and tender touch is needed. Being positive will make the conversation go well.
* Don’t try and solve the problem
* Make sure your partner knows that you are trying to TANGO with them! Just like in the actual dance, if you try to tango with your partner without them knowing, the results are rarely good.
* Ensure that the nurturing statement is genuine. Your partner can feel when you are “just saying something to check a box.” Your nurturing statement doesn’t necessarily need to be related to the topic at hand, but should feel like a genuine expression of your love and appreciation of your partner.

TANGO

**T**ell what happened directly and briefly

**A**ffected me - It affected me… (feelings)

**N**urture - A nurturing, valuing statement

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**G**et it? Reflect what you heard to make sure you understood

**O**bserve how this conversation is affecting you both right now.

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# Building a New Strength

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Partners select a positive character trait that they feel they sometimes can achieve and would like to show more often. The counselor can encourage them in personal growth. Discuss what has kept them from showing this trait in the past and what things in their life now will be obstacles to showing this trait more often. They should identify what support they will need from each other, God, workplace, church, community organizations, and friends or family to see real progress in the coming months. They should identify behavioral indications of when the goal is being met.

For instance, if a husband is working to improve his ability to have self-control of negative emotions during stressful times, he would state that he would try to increase the time per week that he edits out hurtful statements said in anger. He can keep track of when he edits and even create a chart (if he is a bit OCD!). He can even apply the change in other areas of his life besides the couple relationship, such as parenting, extended family and workplace. Similar to a fitness coach that might help a person achieve fitness goals, the counselor can support the partners in their virtue development goals

**Ideas to Create Personal Growth**

Below are some thoughts to inspire you to form your own ideas about how to grow your personal strengths. This can also be helpful in selecting new personal goals for your relationship that can be established or expanded upon. The left column includes a list of personal strengths or relationship goals; the right column includes ideas on how to implement or grow these particular strengths.

| **Personal Strength** | **Idea to Build the Strength** |
| --- | --- |
| **Staying committed to the relationship, despite difficulties** | Write vows of commitment and give to partner |
| **Showing love and affection** | Plan a romantic evening together |
| **Being friends with each other** | Bring up topics of mutual interest to talk about like news, sports or community activities |
| **Using faith or religion to improve our relationship** | Read a book about relationships and faith and share the ideas you learned there with your partner |
| **Showing kindness** | Do five acts of random kindness for your mate this week; make them surprises if you can |
| **Communicating positively** | Open up discussion about plans for the future as a couple while listening well |
| **Forgiving when I am wrong or have offended** | When any offense happens this week, be the first to offer forgiveness for it |
| **Being gracious for faults or weaknesses** | When your partner is preoccupied or “stressed” this week, do not dwell on it, just let it go |
| **Showing compassion when the other is suffering or struggling** | Tell your partner you admire him or her for holding up so well in the midst of so much responsibility and difficulty he or she is facing in life |
| **Trusting** | Write a letter reminding your mate why you trust him or her |
| **Retaining perspective even in overwhelming situations** | Identify the time during the week that tends to be the most stressful. Focus on remaining level-headed in that time |
| **Being willing to take risks for the relationship when needed** | Plan a “grand romantic gesture” such as a public declaration of your love or a big gift (it does not have to be from a store) that will be appreciated by your partner |
| **Persevering with goals for our relationship despite obstacles** | Identify a goal for your relationship, perhaps one you are focused on through counseling. Tell your partner you will never give up on it. Then do something that shows you are working on that goal this week |
| **Listening to the other** | Tell your partner that you would like to sit down and hear about his or her hopes, dreams, plans or struggles sometime this week. Make a date to listen |
| **Being aware and attuned to the other** | Write down for your partner all the “little things” you notice. They may be positive traits, actions, qualities, current events or physical attributes |
| **Acting as a team together** | Ask your partner whether you can plan a team project to do something together - perhaps home improvement, community volunteering or a hobby |
| **Showing gratitude for the good things in our life** | Create artwork that communicates your gratitude to your mate and to God for what is good in your life |
| **Refraining from acting when it is unwise or unwanted** | Promise your partner that even if he or she says something rude or unkind in the future, you will not say anything unkind in return |
| **Controlling emotions or desires when needed** | Offer to prioritize a goal or desire of your mate’s as first in line to complete before one of your own goals or desires |
| **Using positive humor** | See if you can cheer your partner up. Try to make your mate laugh at least once a day |
| **Treating the other with fairness** | Offer to divide up the work as equally as you can when planning a joint task |
| **Staying humble, not arrogant or self-righteous** | Tell your partner that you know there are things about you that are hard to live with. Thank your partner for loving you anyway |
| **Staying humble through admitting wrongdoing** | Be first to admit any offensive or hurtful behavior you did. Don’t wait for your partner to bring it up |

# Date Night/5-Minute Date Night

Invite the couple to go on a date together, just the two of them. Ask them not to talk about their relationship problems and concerns. If they cannot seem to be together with arguing, ask them to choose to do something that does not involve much talking like a bike ride. Try to have the couple come up with their own ideas for their date night. If they are having a lot of trouble, step in and help them brainstorm ways to overcome obstacles. The most important thing about this assignment is getting them to make their specific plans for the date night - including activity, day, place, and time - before they leave your office.

Some important things to remember:

1. This should be a relatively device-free period of time for the couple. It is hard for partners to connect when they are preoccupied with their phones, computers, or TV.
2. Try to avoid activities that don’t encourage conversation like watching TV at home or going to the movies or theater. You want the couple to turn TOWARDS each other instead of turning away.
3. Remind them that this is an opportunity to go back in time and “date” your spouse. People are constantly growing and changing and the things that their partner liked or wanted to do may have changed. They get to date their spouse all over again and get to know who they are in the present.
4. This is also an opportunity to create new memories and try new things. Are your dinner recipes getting boring? Take a cooking class or try a home-delivery meal kit. Want to get out of the house more? Try out the ax-throwing place in town, rent kayaks at the park, or join a community kickball league. The possibilities are endless!
5. COVID-19 changed a lot in our world and for many people, their lives and environment are still being affected. In some areas, it is safer to continue social distancing and avoid public activities. That doesn’t mean that the Date Nights can’t still happen! Take the dog for a walk together, enjoy a glass of wine in the backyard, make dinner together, or create something together at home.
6. Date Nights don’t always have to be an outing or cost money. The options listed above for safe, socially-distanced dates can be free or cheap! They could also include going for a drive alone as a couple, taking a bubble bath together, or having some alone time as a couple with undivided attention. If a couple wants a date with undivided attention, it may mean having the date after the kids are put to bed or setting a clear boundary and period of time where the couple is spending time together and the kids are not allowed to interrupt, except for emergencies.

Sometimes, there are literally not enough hours in the day or personal bandwidth to be able to fit in a date night. However, that does not mean that you shouldn’t have one. One of the more important things a couple does is to stay connected to each other on a daily basis. It is not possible for some couples to have a “date” with each other every day. But most couples can plan to have “five-minute dates” daily. The five-minute date occurs when the couple step away from all other responsibilities to focus on connecting with the daily life of their partner. It is recommended that couples who are repairing their relationship plan to have **two** five-minute date nights daily. Couples who are maintaining a healthy relationship plan at least **one** five-minute date each day. In addition, one longer (more than 2 hours) weekly date is recommended for couples who are repairing their relationship.

***Setting.*** Anywhere you are unlikely to be interrupted. Step onto the back porch, or take the dog for a walk together. Commute to work together or sit down to a meal together. Talk while getting ready for bed. It can be a scheduled phone call if needed. The setting should allow you to focus on each other for an uninterrupted period of five minutes. Ideally, eye contact and tender touch can be used.

***Activity.*** Check in briefly with each other about what is going on in your lives. Think about the things in your partner’s life right now. What is going on at work? How are things with the children or parents? How is your partner’s health today? What stress is your partner facing today? Ask about it. It is okay if the discussion is “mundane” - turning to such things as what to plan for dinner, or discussing a disagreement your partner had with his brother. But it is good to reach for more existential issues like long-term hopes and dreams for life. Questions you can ask during the mini-date night might include:

* What is going on in your life today?
* What’s the best thing going on for you today? The worst thing?
* If you could do anything at all today, what would you do?
* How are things going with (that stressful thing you told me about before)?
* Let me guess, are you feeling (tired, happy, relaxed, deflated - pick an emotion) today?
* What would you like to talk about today?

***What not to do.*** This is not the time to complain, to criticize each other, to be defensive or to withdraw from interaction. The goal is not to try to fix each other or to solve your partner’s problems. Focus on staying connected by just listening and understanding what is going on with your partner today.

Date Night Ideas

#### ***Active Adventures***

* Arcade
* Axe-throwing
* Batting Cages
* Bike to Lunch
* Bowling
* Cooking Class
* Couples Yoga
* Dance Class
* Driving Range
* Fitness Class
* GoKart Racing
* Ice Skating
* Laser Tag
* Mini Golf
* Paintball
* Playground picnic
* Swimming
* Tennis

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#### ***Blast on a Budget***

* Coffee date – paint your own mug, then go grab a cup
* Day of open house tours
* Dollar Store adventure – you each get $2 to invest in the date’s entertainment at the Dollar Store
* Game night & take out
	+ Monopoly & Chinese
	+ Scrabble & Italian
	+ Jenga & Pizza
	+ Poker & Pizza
	+ X Box & Sushi
* Lotto adventure – $30 worth of lotto tickets; winnings set budget for rest of the night
* Make your own pizza
* Target adventure – you each get $20 to invest in entertainment for rest of the evening
* Test drive dream cars

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#### ***Restaurant ABCs***

* Pick a restaurant for every letter of the alphabet.  Some letters may be a bit of a stretch – be creative

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#### ***Traditional Trysts***

* Dinner & a Movie – he picks dinner, she picks movie
Dinner & a Movie – she picks dinner, he picks movie
* Dive Bar: Bar game Olympics: head to a local dive bar for bar food, pool, trivia, darts and shuffleboard
* Double Date – he picks couple and place to go
Double Date – she picks couple and place to go
* Mall Date – high school throwback, pick a restaurant or food court stop, do some shopping or catch a movie
* His Choice – he picks and plans date
Her Choice – she picks and plans date
* Restaurant Hop – he picks place for drinks, she picks place for dinner
Restaurant Hop – she picks place for drinks, he picks place for dinner
* Sports Bar – Game Watch

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***Expensive Excursions***

* Brunch and Couples’ Massage
* Concert
* Regional Wine or Brewery Tour – You may want to enlist a car service for the date!
* Golf – pick a course and book a tee time for two
* Night at the Casino/Resort – pick a Saturday night to spend at the nearest casino or resort
* Night in [Quaint Town] – pick a Saturday night to spend away at a quaint town within driving distance
* Night in [Big City] – he picks show/entertainment, she picks dinner
Night in [Big City] – she picks show/entertainment, he picks dinner
Night in [Big City] – eat at famous, impossible to get reservation, restaurant
* Sporting Event
1. Make a fort
2. Play trivia
3. Watch a sports game and bet
4. Look at wedding album/video
5. “Minute to Win It” games
6. Make a music video
7. Do a science experiment
8. Watch YouTube videos
9. Make a song list and dance
10. Candle Lit Dinner
11. Give Massages
12. Make homemade ice cream
13. Cook a meal together
14. Picnic in backyard/living room
15. Play cards
16. Put a puzzle together
17. Camp in backyard/living room
18. Play board games
19. Make a couple’s “bucket list”
20. Build a snowman
21. Spend $10 at Thrift Store
22. Italian Night – Food/Music/Movie
23. Mexican Night – Food/Music/Movie
24. Shoot hoops together
25. Play racquetball
26. Go swimming
27. **Plan a picnic**Whether you’re heading to a park or even just your backyard or fire escape, put down a blanket, get a spread of yummy snacks, a bottle of wine, and you’ve got yourself a lovely, low-cost date.
28. **Go birdwatching**Sometimes the most romantic activities involve being outdoors together. Check if your favorite local park offers birdwatching tours, or just hang out in your backyard with binoculars.
29. **Take a brewery tour**Learn something and get beer in the process? This is pretty much a foolproof date. To find a tour, start by calling a microbrewery near you and go from there.
30. **Take a workout class**Take a spin class, a rowing class, or one of the myriad of trendy boutique [workout](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/13/0/19/DealFrame/DealFrame.cmp?bm=728&BEFID=96424&acode=709&code=709&aon=&crawler_id=445719&dealId=oLKeqzYQyxQ9x4iJietmIg%3D%3D&searchID=&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.drugsupplystore.com%2Fdrive-exercise-peddler-with-handle%2F%3FbigCommerce&DealName=Drive%20Exercise%20Peddler%20with%20Handle&MerchantID=445719&HasLink=yes&category=0&AR=-1&NG=1&GR=1&ND=1&PN=1&RR=-1&ST=&MN=msnFeed&FPT=SDCF&NDS=1&NMS=1&NDP=1&MRS=&PD=0&brnId=2455&lnkId=8070676&Issdt=171207051939&IsFtr=0&IsSmart=0&dlprc=55.38&SKU=DRV10274) classes that have popped up just about everywhere in recent years. Couples that sweat together, stay together.
31. **Troll for photo booths**Spend an evening looking for photo booths, and taking fun photos together. The souvenirs from the evening are just a bonus.
32. **Take a boxing class together**Not your typical date, get the endorphins flowing taking a boxing class together. If you’re on the hunt for a good boxing class, read how to find a good gym on [ExpertBoxing.com](http://www.expertboxing.com/).
33. **Visit a museum and see something unexpected**Going to a museum is an easy date idea. Try a controversial show and the conversation will flow
34. **Head on a (mini) road trip**Pick a destination about an hour from where you live—it could be anything from a flea market to a restaurant off the beaten path—and just drive.
35. **Meet for drinks at a local landmark**From the Eiffel Tower, to the Empire State Building, to the Top of the Space Needle—head to a local landmark and admire the view, while creating your own movie worthy moment.
36. **Make homemade pizzas with wild toppings**Instead of just any dinner, make homemade pizzas, and don’t be afraid to go wild with the toppings.
37. **Stargaze**It’s a bit of a cliché, but completely romantic—who could resist a date that involves stargazing? To get started download [The Night Sky app](https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/the-night-sky/id475772902?mt=8) so you actually know what you are looking at.
38. **Volunteer together**A great first date idea, head anywhere from a soup kitchen to a home for the elderly to volunteer, while getting to know your date.
39. **Work on a DIY project**Look through Pinterest together for a project, and then execute it together!
40. **Sing Karaoke**While you are on your karaoke date, don’t forget to do a duet. When in doubt, Sonny and Cher’s “I Got You Babe” can’t be beat.
41. **Learn to dance**Find a dance studio that offers sessions for first timers and couples. Looking to do something really special? Consider booking a private lesson to start.
42. **Go camping!**Borrow equipment from a friend if you don’t have your own, make s’mores over an open fire, and completely unplug from technology. You can even do this in your backyard.
43. **Shop for each other**Head to a thrift store, set a budget, and pick out outfits for each other!
44. **Kiss, kiss, kiss**Try mastering these 36 kisses: French Kiss, Sniff Kiss, Nip Kiss, Eskimo Kiss, Butterfly Kiss, Basic Kiss, Spiderman Kiss, Flavored Kiss, Vacuum Kiss, Fish Kiss, Tease Kiss, Candy Kiss, Ice Kiss, Firm Kiss, From Behind Kiss, Slow Motion Kiss, Opposite Kiss, Downward Kiss, Tickle Kiss, No Lips Kiss, Blow Kiss, Woodpecker Kiss, Lady and the Tramp Kiss, Shocking Kiss, High Low Kiss, Kiss on the Hand, Kiss on the Cheek, Kiss on the Neck, Kiss on the Fingers, Kiss on the Shoulder, Kiss on the Ear, Kiss on the Back, Kiss on the Navel, Kiss on the Nose, Kiss on the Eyes, Kiss on the Forehead. Not sure what they all mean? Just have fun with it.
45. **Recreate the first date you ever had together**If you went to a movie, rent the same movie. If you went out for dinner, go back to the same restaurant or make the dish that you ate at home.
46. **Take a ride on a Ferris wheel**Countless romantic comedies feature couples falling in love at the top of the Ferris wheel, and with good reason. Plus, there is something so nostalgic and wonderful about heading to a local fair or amusement park on a date.
47. **Do something a little bad**Skinny dipping, light sidewalk graffiti, doing something you aren’t supposed to be doing can actually bring couples together. Within reason, of course. Plus, it’s great for a future story.
48. **Rent your “dream car”**Take your partner and a rented dream car on a weekend adventure, even if it’s just driving/exploring.
49. **Go to a fancy bar and dress up**Get dressed up, go to a fancy bar, and try something off the exotic cocktails list.
50. **Head to the farm and go berry picking**Berry picking is a fun activity, and also one that allows for a lot of talking and getting-to-know-each-other time.
51. **Rent a Vespa and go for a ride**Sightseeing on the back of a Vespa can be pretty romantic. And terrifying. And exciting.
52. **Go to a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show***Find a local showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, dress-up, and get into it.
53. **Host your own walking tour**Take your date on a walking tour of the neighborhood where you grew up showing off your elementary school and local haunts along the way.
54. **Go for a hot air balloon ride**A classic date that is hard for anyone to resist.
55. **Eat a dessert only dinner**Skip to the good stuff, and by good stuff, we mean dessert, ordering a sampling of the dessert menu.
56. **Bake a cake**Or cupcakes, or brownies, or cookies! Any activity that also involves eating makes for a great date.
57. **Have a game night**Get out your favorite board game (Clue, Monopoly, you name it), and have an old-fashioned game night date.
58. **Go to the zoo**Stroll through the local zoo admiring everything from the tigers to penguins while getting to know each other.
59. **Take a hike**Be one with nature on your next date, taking a hike at your favorite nature preserve or hiking path. The more picturesque the spot you choose, the better.
60. **Play tourist**Decide to play tourist for the day in your hometown—going everywhere from the museum, to the major landmark, to the most famous restaurant in town.
61. **Wake up at 4 a.m. and watch the sunrise together**Not all great dates are at night. Get up early, curl up together, and watch the sunrise.
62. **Have a friendly bowling competition**Dust off those bowling [shoes](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/13/0/19/DealFrame/DealFrame.cmp?bm=647&BEFID=96602&aon=%5E1&MerchantID=425656&crawler_id=425656&dealId=978k5PsOvP0xzVqfBCtWaQ%3D%3D&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.webstaurantstore.com%2Fcarlisle-4042401-spectrum-brown-boot-and-shoe-brush%2F27140424BR.html%3Futm_source%3Dshopping.com%26utm_medium%3Dcpc%26utm_term%3D27140424BR%26utm_campaign%3Djanitorial+supplies&linkin_id=8058742&Issdt=171208085412&searchID=p42.75d2026786f59223017a&DealName=Carlisle+4042401+Spectrum+Brown+Boot+and+Shoe+Brush&dlprc=39.99&AR=1&NG=4&NDP=5&PN=1&ST=7&FPT=DSP&NDS=&NMS=&MRS=&PD=&brnId=14743&IsFtr=0&IsSmart=0&op=&CM=&RR=1&IsLps=0&code=&acode=686&category=&HasLink=&ND=&MN=&GR=&lnkId=&SKU=27140424BR), and have a friendly bowling competition slash date.
63. **Host a decadent brunch**Go all out for brunch making everything from French toast with flambéd bananas to mimosas.
64. **Binge watch a Netflix TV show together**Pick a show on Netflix that neither have you seen, and watch a few more episodes than you probably should.
65. **Create your own wine tasting**You don’t have to go somewhere fancy to do a wine tasting as a date, you can do it at home. Ask for recommendations of some bottles to try at your favorite local wine store, and go from there.
66. **Head to the drive-in**Take some inspiration from *Grease* and seek out a drive-in (it sure will beat that traditional movie date). Find locations by heading to [driveinmovie.com](http://www.driveinmovie.com/). Get some popcorn, lean back in your car, and enjoy.
67. **Head to Medieval Times**Not exactly fine dining, but an evening at Medieval Times will definitely be unexpected, silly, and fun.
68. **Head to a free outdoor concert**A great way to spend a summer afternoon, seek out a free outdoor concert, everything from the symphony to an indie band, and enjoy.
69. **Read aloud to each other from your favorite books**Each bring a copy of your favorite book, and read aloud from the first chapters.
70. **Have a five course dinner at different places**Instead of going to one restaurant, pick a bunch of different restaurants to enjoy various courses of your dinner date at.
71. **Play truth or dare**Not just for seventh grade parties, an evening of truth or dare makes for a great get-to-know-you date.
72. **Find a rooftop pool and go swimming**Rooftop pools are popping up everywhere from hotels to sports clubs! They make for a great date spot.
73. **Go exploring with your cameras**Take a camera/phone, head to a neighborhood you don’t know well and start exploring and snapping photos
74. **Head to ice skating**You don’t have to be an Olympian to have fun on an ice skating date. Finish off the date with hot chocolate.
75. **Go to the beach**Head to the beach for a day of laying out in the sun, relaxation, and getting to know someone.
76. **Do something neither of you have done before**Sometimes the best dates involve doing something that neither of you have done before—taking a pottery class, riding in a helicopter, or even just trying a new restaurant.

# Dreams

This intervention helps couples discuss their dreams for their relationship (Gottman, Ryan, Carrére & Erley, 2002). The focus is the underlying deeper dreams that may be threatened due to relationship distress such as safety, security, avoiding loneliness or being loved.

The counselor asks the couple to remember back to their childhood. What did they used to think that a romantic relationship or marriage would be like? What did they hope to find in a relationship as an adult?

The counselor then asks the couple to remember back to the origin of their relationship. What first attracted them to each other? What was the first moment when they realized that the other person loved them, and they loved that person? What is the narrative of their relationship? These types of questions are intended to elicit the underlying dreams for the relationship.

***The counselor’s role.*** The counselor actively seeks themes such as being loved, finding security, being respected, feeling valued, not being alone, belonging, being safe, experiencing compassion, getting attention, being helpful, finding trust, or being understood or understanding. There may be others but the counselor should look for underlying themes of needs and help each partner identify at least one that was part of their dream for a healthy romantic relationship. The counselor also assesses the partners’ hope for an improved relationship. Partners with little hope often have a difficult time remembering their dreams or might not remember ever having dreams for their relationship. An inability to do so may indicate that the person has already given up on the relationship.

Once identified, the relationship needs can be used to help the partners make intentional decisions to meet each other’s needs more effectively. The partners can discuss how they might meet each other’s needs healthily. This can be discussed as part of the session or attempted as homework.

***Unrealistic dreams.*** Some partners need to adjust their dreams for their relationship to something more realistic to their relationship strengths and abilities. This intervention can help identify unrealistic dreams, the counselor should redirect the couple to see ways to accept each other at the place in their life journey where they are, to embrace healthy dreams, or to look at whether they might get some needs met elsewhere. For example, if someone has a strong need for belonging but their partner cannot create a sense of belonging, then finding belonging through a local church, club, workplace or volunteer organization can help meet that need and relieve some of the pressure from the relationship. Marriages or romantic relationships cannot meet every psychological need.

#

# Time-Out

Remember the 4 C’s:

***Clues.*** Discuss the clues that would signal when a time-out is needed.

For instance, if one partner feels a sense of fear, feels emotionally flooded or wants to be aggressive or display violence, then a time out is needed. You can talk specifically about times in the past when a time-out would have been helpful and plan to use it in similar situations in the future. It may be helpful to have a neutral, non-blaming signal or word to cue the other person a time-out is needed

***Commit.*** Commit to take the time-out when either person asks for it. Set an agreed-on length of time for the time-out.

***Cool down.*** Plan to engage in cooling down, self-soothing or distracting activities during the time-out

Typical time-out activities include exercising, watching television, surfing the web, writing in a journal (*if* it can be positive), cooking a meal, taking a soothing bath or running an errand. This is a crucial part of the time-out. If one person ruminates about their partner or the conflict during the time-out or plans new strategies to win the argument, then the conflict will only escalate, causing further damage to the relationship and to you as individuals. The primary goal of the time-out is to decrease emotionally negative “flooding” so you can re-engage with each other about the issue effectively.

***Come back.*** It is important to come back together after the time-out to apologize for offenses committed before the time-out; take responsibility for your actions within the conflict; reconcile; agree, or agree to disagree; and try to make any decisions that are necessary.

Typically, time-outs need to be long enough to allow for physiological flooding to stop (blood pressure to come down, heart rate to slow, blaming or condemning thoughts to return to normal0, which on average is about an hour.

Important things to remember:

* Consider what emotional and physiological symptoms typically predate a blow-up argument: heart racing, tension, stomachache, feeling trapped, wanting to cry, wanting to throw things, screaming? As you identify the signs that you are beginning to become elevated, you are better able to call a time-out before things escalate.
* You must commit to a time-out when it’s called, even if you don’t want to. The desire to continue arguing can be tempting sometimes, but it is important to respect your partner’s request and desire to have a productive conversation with you.
* **YOU CANNOT CALL A TIME-OUT FOR YOUR PARTNER!** The important thing is to recognize your own emotional state and only you are privy to that. Calling a time-out for your partner (“You’re too emotionally elevated. You need a time-out.”) can feel like a scolding or chastisement from a parent, which usually will escalate your partner and the conflict instead of de-escalating them.
* Do whatever you need to to cool down during the cool-down period. Even if you didn’t call the time-out, calm yourself down during this period. Being able to come back to an emotion-heavy conversation in a more peaceful state is helpful for both you, your partner, and your relationship.
* Think of good cool-down techniques that actually calm you down, instead of distracting you. While easy, things like playing on your phone, watching tv, or playing video games tend to distract more than calm you. Try instead for things that bring you peace: sitting in silence, meditating, praying, going for a walk or a drive, playing with your pets or children, taking a short nap, taking a shower or bath, or doing a hobby like baking or gardening or mowing the lawn or washing the car. The goal is to come back in a peaceful state.
* **YOU MUST COME BACK TO THE CONVERSATION.** A time-out is not a period, it’s a comma. Calling a time-out does not dismiss or end the conversation and you can’t keep calling a time-out to delay a conversation you don’t want to have. The point of a time-out is to be a comma - to allow a pause before “pressing play” again. It is important to set a time when you call the time-out to come back together and resume the conversation at a lower emotional state. If you don’t commit to coming back together, the current conflict gets swept under the rug but becomes a hot-spot for a bigger flare-up the next time the issue is broached.
* A time-out is typically 1-24 hours, but try to keep it as close as you can to 1 hour. The further out you get from a conflict, the less relevance it appears to have despite continuing to be an important and relevant issue. It also perpetuates tension and negative feelings in the relationship. A time-block of up to 24 hours can be needed in situations where the timing of the conflict is inconvenient. If you are fighting late at night right before bed when you know that one or both of you have an early morning the next day, it can be a good idea to call a time-out and reconviene the next day when there is more time to talk. Or, perhaps an argument is occurring minutes before you are going to walk out the door for work. In that situation, it is typically best to call a time-out, then reconvene after work when you don’t have the timed responsibilities.

**Time out Strategy for Couples**

Cool down to avoid flooding, fighting & flying off the handle

1. Commit to a cool down period, even if you don’t feel like it.

2. Understand things that lead to overheated situations, and avoid them.
Plan for success.

3. Either person can call a time-out

4. Set a return time. Generally 1-24 hours.

5. Cool down during the cool down. Don’t think about counter-attacks for later. Distract yourself with your personalized list of cool down activities.

6. Commit to come back together—keep your word.
If still flooded with negative emotions, repeat steps.

7. Repair damage. Apologize, take responsibility for your part in the fight,
show your love in a meaningful way.

# Ways to Soothe Difficult Interactions With a Mate

In the midst of a difficult conversation it can be difficult to stop emotions from escalating. Yet difficult conversations in life are inevitable. It will be important to be able to discuss difficult things as a couple. If the emotions are flooding either of you, then you might need to declare a time-out. But for other difficult conversations, see which of the following might be helpful to you. Check off the ones that you think are worth trying. It is important to practice soothing yourself regularly, first with your counselor’s help, then in a time that is not too tense, and finally during a more tense moment.

***Perspective Taking***

* Think about the long-term perspective on the issue at hand. Is it that important? WIll it matter years from now?
* Remember it is more important to be loving than to be right or get your way.
* Give yourself permission to give up control of a situation and just see where things will take you.
* Say something valuing and nurturing about your relationship as a couple, how important it is and how much you appreciate the relationship.
* Say something you are grateful for within the difficult conversation. For example, perhaps you are grateful that there is no swearing or yelling.
* Ask yourself, “How old am I?” By doing this, you remember you are an adult and capable of handling difficult conversations.
* Say something valuing about yourself. Be valuing and nurturing to yourself by thinking something positive about yourself.

***Body Awareness and Calming***

* Attend to tense body cues like raised shoulders, tense belly, wrinkled brow, pulled down facial muscles, fidgeting hands or legs, uncomfortable body position or others. Relax the tense body part.
* Take a slow, deep breath and slowly blow out your anxiety, frustration or sadness.
* Lay down in a comfortable position if you can. If you are at home, you may find getting on the couch or bed in a comfortable position is helpful to calm your body.

***Refocusing***

* Stop and pray together as a couple asking for wisdom for the difficult situation.
* Change the topic to something more positive if the discussion is not an important one. Ask your partner if it is okay to talk about something else for a while.
* Stop and consider what would be the wise course of action here. Ask yourself how someone whom you know to be wise might act in this situation.

***Scenery Change***

* Go for a walk together as a couple and discuss the issue outside.
* Have the difficult conversation in a public place to increase the constraints on extreme negative behavior.
* Take a mini-break from the conversation (like a Time-out) and then return to talk. This can often prevent escalation. For example, even a trip to the restroom or a quick check on the kids can bring down tension.
* Light a candle or the fireplace. The fire has a calming effect.
* Turn on beautiful music.
* Eat or drink something delicious while you talk. (Avoid more than a minimum of alcohol. Alcohol can lower inhibitions too much and is often associated with aggressive behavior.)
* Have the talk naked if it tends to make you more generous with each other.

# Soft Start-Up

John Gottman has developed an intervention that he calls the “soft start-up.” It is described fully in *The Relationship Cure* (2002). This intervention combines Gottman’s soft start-up idea with the emotional connection metaphor of a porcupine often used in emotion-focused couple therapy (Johnson & Woolley, 2008). This is a brief introduction to the idea with application.

Couples often hurt each other by starting difficult conversations harshly. Partners may be harsh because they anticipate an argument will ensue on the topic. They are often right! However, a harsh start-up is a self-fulfilling prophecy. A prickly porcupine approach is highly unlikely to have a good outcome for the conversation.

In contrast, if the person is able to start a difficult conversation softly, then a better outcome is more likely. At least the person can know he or she is innocent of negativity in the discussion.

Counselors can teach the concept to partners for enrichment, prevention or relationship repair. A good metaphor that is helpful for this concept is that of porcupines mating. If a porcupine wants to mate, would he or she come to the partner with all their quills up and ready to throw darts? If it begins to throw darts, is mating likely to happen? However, if it shows its soft under-belly, a positive response is likely. Difficult conversations are similar.

Soft Start-up Worksheet

The use of softness and gentleness in beginning a difficult conversation or making a request will prevent hurts and bring the couple closer together.

Things to remember:

1. Remember that the relationship is important. Protect it by treating your partner with gentleness and grace whenever possible.
2. Stop and think about how to start a difficult conversation.
3. Choose times when you and your partner are likely to have good self-control. When people are tired, stressed or distracted—they tend to lose self control more easily.
4. Start with a loving, caring and gentle statement about your relationship or partner.
5. Use an “I-statement.”
6. Close by giving the other person a sense of control and freedom about the topic.
7. Observe the effect of your soft start-up attempt.

| **A Topic** | **A Soft Start-Up Example** |
| --- | --- |
| *Example.) Reducing Criticism*  | *“What you say about me is really important to me. I am affected by what you say because I love you. Can we talk about that together?”* |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

# Love Languages

The idea of Love Languages comes from Gary Chapman’s book *The 5 Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chapman, 1992). He indicated that different people and their differing personalities tend to give and receive love in different ways. When you are able to recognize these preferences for love in yourself and your partner, you are better equipped to be able to learn to identify the root of your conflicts, connect better, and increase your bond (Chapman, 1992)

Chapman suggest that there were five love languages that people tend to use:

1. Acts of Service - for the people who prefer actions that can speak louder than words
2. Receiving Gifts - for the people who feel most loved when receiving a heartfelt gift
3. Quality Time - for the people who prefer receiving their partner’s undivided attention
4. Words of Affirmation - for the people who feel most loved when receiving affirming, confirming, or supportive statements and complements
5. Physical Touch - for the people who feel most loved when receiving or engaging in appropriate physical affection

You can find out your love language results [here.](https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/love-language)

Please be aware that your love language results are not static and can change over time, change based on the relationship with the other person, change based on whether or not you are giving or receiving love. We all desire the five love languages on a spectrum, which increases situational variability.

The goal of discovering your love language preferences is to develop more insight into yourself while also clarifying your needs to your partner. When you know that you are connecting with your partner in a way they appreciate, it can increase your bond and strengthen your relationship. It can also help you to feel as if your efforts are worthwhile and appreciated when your partner is accepting your love.

# Love Bank

This classic couple intervention promulgated by Willard Harley (2008) is described as an effective skills-based intervention to increase positivity in a couple’s relationship, thus warming the “home fires” for the possibility of increased bond. The couple’s relationship is described as a love bank where each positive loving and valuing action is a deposit, but each negative action is a withdrawal. The cumulative effect of too few deposits and too many withdrawals is emphasized with the easily remembered metaphor. This intervention is particularly good for couples who need to increase the work in their relationship.

Over the years in both our labs, we have used the love bank in a variety of ways. The simplest version of the intervention has each partner list things the other does that they appreciate. They can put monetary amounts on the love-bank deposit to further communicate the value of various deposits. Then they decide what things they could do that week and attempt five to seven “love bank deposits” during the week.

Given Gottman’s (Gottman, Ryan, Carrére & Erley, 2002) research indicating that negative interactions are more powerful than positive interactions, we have coupled teaching this concept with the instructions on love-bank intervention as well. In fact, Roy Baumeister and his colleagues have found six different literatures that indicate that negative events do about four to five times as much damage as a positive event does good. So, to keep a positive balance in the love bank, couples can count each negative as five love units that are withdrawn from the love bank and each positive act as one unit deposited. So we encourage partners to use as many positive love bank contributions as they can considering that negative interactions are inevitable in every relationship.

Other versions of applying the love-bank concept for enrichment or counseling include:

* Creating a love bank “jar” with positive deposits written on the list
* Having the couple keep a log or journal of love-bank deposits (but not withdrawals) during the week to focus them on positive interactions
* Using a computer or smartphone to keep lists and reminders to make specific love-bank deposits in an electronic calendar
* Discussing attributions for love-bank deposits can illustrate the negative attributions that have developed in the relationship and help the couple reflect on them.

This intervention helps increase the positives in the relationship. This is often an important early step in a treatment plan to help the couple gain enough ground and experience counseling in a positive light so that they can take on more difficult aspects of their relationship in subsequent sessions. This intervention is also appropriate for relationship enrichment in a group or dyadic format.

**Love Bank Worksheet**

Directions: List 10 behaviors you can do that would please your partner and make him/her feel loved (Investments in Love Bank). Then list 5 Behaviors that you do that bother or hurt your partner that you could reduce (Reducing Withdrawals from the Love Bank). After completing the list, trade with your partner, and talk about the discussion questions listed at the end of this exercise.

Investments

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Reducing Withdrawals

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Discussion Questions:

1. What items did the other person list accurately? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2. What items were you surprised to see listed? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3. What items would you add to the list? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4. What will each of you commit to do differently this week to increase your Love Bank Balance this week? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# Sculpting Intimacy/Space in Office

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In this exercise, the couple use space in the room and sculpting techniques (Hernandez, 1998) to create a memorable demonstration of the effects of communication on a sense of intimacy. This is one of the classic hope-focused interventions (Worthington & Ripley, 2009) tested and often used in our couple labs. There is a demonstration of a couple in counseling with Ev using sculpting with a forgiveness issue at [www.hopecouples.com](http://www.hopecouples.com). This intervention strongly demonstrates that partners have the power through their communication to create closeness or distance between them emotionally.

Couples who are younger, less conventional in their style and more “artsy” tend to step into this intervention with both feet (so to speak). Yet sometimes conventional couples will surprise you with the creativity of their sculptures. Sculpting is shaping their bodies in a way that physically demonstrates the ideas they are discussing. Using space in the room is a physical demonstration of the closeness or nearness partners feel toward each other. They represent intimacy through placing themselves close or far apart.

This can be done in a variety of ways. Ideas for use of sculpture or space as a metaphor for the relationship are as follows:

* Each partner can have a turn sculpting their bodies to demonstrate the intimacy or emotions of their relationship at the time or the events of counseling
* The couple can create a compromise sculpture as a task of working together and practicing compromise with each other. (For couples who like to play, you could write the names of six animals on index cards, folding them to hide the writing. Each partner draws one, and the compromise sculpture must contain each animal.)
* The couple can create an ideal sculpture, either together or as individuals
* The couple can create a sculpture to model something like the way they see their relationship that day. The counselor can ask questions like: What would help to improve this sculpture to something happier [or with less tension, healthier, less in-your-face, etc.]? What is the difference between this goal for the session that you just illustrated and your overall goal for counseling as a couple? What should we do in session today to help shift and change this sculpture to be more what you would like it to be? [If the couple is facing away from each other,] what would it take to merely turn towards each other again?
* Sculpting or space in the room is generally done repeatedly to help demonstrate whether the interventions that the couple have engaged in during counseling are helping improve the relationship
* If the couple is interested, then use a camera (or the camera on their phone) to take a picture of their sculpture so they can see their ideas and progress in the future. In fact, couples who shot a series of pictures of their sculptures have sometimes used the prints to make their Joshua Memorial at the end of counseling. Be careful not to violate privacy laws or ethics when taking pictures in sessions.

# Locating the Warmth Virtues in My Relationship

Think of three important relationships in your life. One would be your relationship with your partner and one with Jesus/an important person in your life (child, best friend, sibling, parent, etc.)/yourself. Then also think about how you are in relationship with others. Make a check mark for which of the following is your experience of those relationships in the past month. If a yes or no checkmark is too difficult, you can write in how often you experience each of these things in the relationship with a percent. For example, if half of the time you felt valued by your partner, then you would write in 50%.

| **Experience in the relationship in the last month** | **Partner** | **Jesus/Important Person/Yourself** | **Other People** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. I felt valued, treated as important
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I felt loved
 |  |  |  |
| 1. We are deeply connected and emotionally bonded
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I was treated with kindness and compassion
 |  |  |  |
| 1. This person was forgiving and merciful towards me
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I am sure this person is passionate or excited about me
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I felt trusted
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I knew our relationship is committed, steadfast and solid
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I felt safe and protected
 |  |  |  |
| 1. I felt understood, listened to and cared about
 |  |  |  |

#

1. When have you had these warm relationship experiences in the past? Discuss which of these experiences you most want, or long for, in your relationship with each other, with Jesus/an important person in your life (child, best friend, sibling, parent, etc.)/yourself, and with others with whom you have a close relationship with (friends, relatives, etc.). These ten things are warmth-based relationship virtues. They are the hallmarks of a healthy warm relationship. Even if you are doing “all the right things” in terms of relationship skills, healthy living and being faithful, if the relationship does not have these qualities, it will feel hollow and may not meet your deepest needs.
2. Where do you get your needs met in these three relationships?

(When integrating faith) The relationship with God should be one where you can have all your needs met. Yet it is important to develop your relationship with God and invest in it to fully experience God meeting needs. God is infinitely capable of being present, available, warm and giving in relationship with you. Your partner is not always able to provide all that you need. Others, such as family members or friends, are also not able to provide everything we need.

(When not integrating faith) Your partner is not always able to provide all that you need. Others, such as family members or friends, are also not able to provide everything we need. Rather than relying on others to meet *all* of your needs within a relationship, it is important to take a hard look at what is really important to you and of those really important things, what needs you can ask others to realistically be able to meet for you. Maybe it is having someone meet one or two needs, instead of twelve; maybe it is having multiple people meet a specific need - it depends on you. Like stated before, your partner and the people in your life cannot meet every need; that means that you will need to look introspectively for some of your needs to be met. You are the master of your inner environment and the person who NEVER leaves you. Therefore, your heart and mind and soul are capable of being the safe place that you can retreat to for warmth and comfort. That might mean positive self-affirmations, forgiving yourself for a mistake you made, or simply loving yourself for who you are.
3. Do you sometimes look to others or your partner to be like God/to be like yourself in your life and to meet all of your needs? (If you have been looking to your partner to be like God/to be like yourself in your relationship, you might just be frustrated.)
4. Was this exercise hard for you? How so? If you found this questionnaire difficult, or if your experience of these warmth-based relationship virtues is lacking, then discuss with your counselor what is blocking you. Three common roadblocks for people in these areas are that they a.) did not experience warm virtues in their family growing up, b.) are losing hope that they are possible today, or c.) have cut off parts of themselves in an effort to survive difficult things in life. Consider what might be your roadblock. It might be one of these or something else entirely.

# **CLEAVE**

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CLEAVE allows for discussion with the couple of various ways of improving their bond. It works well with couples in enrichment or with those who need some education about intimacy. There is a take-home index card for couples available at [www.hopecouples.com](http://www.hopecouples.com) that is useful for reinforcing the ideas from this intervention. CLEAVE stands for:

***C: Change actions to positive.*** Increasing small everyday positive interactions will increase closeness and the bond between partners. Partners can reflect on previous positive interventions they might have done such as the love bank. Partners can discuss what small everyday things they do that are perceived as positive and how those things affect their intimacy.

***L: Loving romance.*** Partners can put work into creating romantic experiences. They might go on a date together pretending that they are back in their original dating time period and reflect on how they are different now. Generally couples in counseling were kinder, gentler and more forgiving of each other earlier in their history. They can discuss whether that is possible today.

***E: Employ a calendar.*** For some couples this is one of the most important interventions they engage in. Many couples have such busy calendars that there is no time for intimacy or bonding. They may need to plan positive events, dates, time together, weekend getaways - even if there is some level of cost to other activities in their life. Couples who have arranged their lives to be fairly independent of each other may want to reflect on whether that is working for them now.

***A: Adjust intimacy elsewhere.*** If one partner has more need for intimacy while the other is more independent, then the partners can discuss how the person with the higher need will get those needs met. The needs may be met through other friendships, family relationships, shared hobbies with other people and group spiritual activities. The more independent partner may need to cut back on intimate friendship time elsewhere (such as at work) in order to not feel stifled in the relationship.

***V:*** ***Value my partner.*** This concept is repeated throughout counseling because it is so central to a healthy relationship. People must feel loved and valued in order to feel close to someone. Partners can discuss how they value each other observably and tangibly.

***E: Enjoy ourselves physically (sexually, if sexually active).*** Partners can learn more about lovemaking by reading books on sexual intimacy or by communicating more about and during sex. Partners may need to set aside uninterrupted time to increase their understanding of what is pleasurable to their partner. They can take on the goal of becoming a tailor-made lover to their mate. For this particular part of the intervention, it is especially important to take developmental and health considerations into account.

**CLEAVE** 

There are several elements that make intimacy, or closeness, possible in a relationship. These can range from general attitudes to everyday actions. It is important for couples to work together to foster more and more intimacy as relationships grow. Below are some important elements to keep in mind as you and your partner grow closer to one another. Consider this scripture as you complete this worksheet:

**C: Changing Actions for the Positive** – Do things that show that you value your partner. Return to “The Blessing” worksheet and ask what was done that helped to increase positive interactions in your relationship.

*I will change my actions for the positive this week by:*

**L: Loving Romance** – Be active in kindling the flame of romance in your relationship. This can be done through big actions (special trips) and small actions (taking a walk together) alike. Talk to your partner about past romantic experiences to learn what is romantic in your relationship.

*My loving romance this week will be:*

**E: Employing a Calendar** – Adjust your schedule to spend time with your partner. Pick a time during the week when you will spend some positive time with your partner. During this time, keep things positive; this is not a time to discuss difficult problems. Use a calendar to set this time and make sure to keep the date to show your partner that you care about being with them.

*I will schedule something positive on this day: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and at this time: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

**A: Adjusting Intimacy Elsewhere** – Intimacy requires time. It is easy for other things to steal time away from our relationships. Ask yourself if something else is pulling you away from time and intimacy with your partner. These could be things like hobbies, work, or even other people such as friends or family members. Perhaps these other “intimacies” (anything you spend time with and feel close to) need to be de-emphasized or ended in order for you to grow closer to your partner. All couples need some outside interests, but if there are things that have become obstacles to what you want, explore it.

*I will adjust my intimacy elsewhere this week by:*

**V: Value My Partner** – Consider how you can show your value for your partner in an observable way this week. Similar to “C” and “L”, this principle encourages couples to value one another. This is one of the most important aspects to healthy relationships. Find small everyday ways to show your partner that you value them, like hugs, kisses and kind words. Keep these actions sincere and repeat them in order to remind your partner that you value them.

*I will value my partner this week by:*

**E: Enjoy Each Other Sexually** – Sex is an important aspect of relationships and can be a powerful way to foster greater intimacy. Sex may look different for each couple. While each couple needs to find what is comfortable for them, being open and honest about sex can go a long way in partners growing closer together. Perhaps you would like to make a reasonable goal this week to increase sexual intimacy in your relationship. Consider employing a calendar to plan for it. Or perhaps you might set a goal of discussing what it is about sexual intimacy that is important to your relationship and how sexual intimacy looks for your relationship.

*This week I will work to enjoy our relationship sexually by:*

**(If integrating faith) Pray together for your marriage at least twice this week.**

# Seven Tips for a Good Apology

Confessing our mistakes is a vital part of healing hurts in relationships. Below there are seven principles that make for a good confession. Discuss these with your partner. Talk about what confessions are like in your relationship currently and what, if anything, you would like to work to change. Use these principles the next time you know you need to confess to your partner.

***Timing***

1. Confessing before you are caught or asked to apologize will make it easier.

***What to say***

1. Remind your partner of your commitment to the relationship, your love and care for them
2. Make a clear direct confession, without explaining circumstances or situations that contributed to your offense
3. Take responsibility for any sins or problems that may have contributed to hurting the other (such as being overly busy, preoccupied, or being focused only on your own needs)
4. Use tenderness and touch throughout the process if accepted

***After the confession***

1. Immediately do something to show your change of heart and repentance. For example, if you were not paying enough attention, then plan some time together just to attend to each other. Or if you said something mean, write a love letter full of kind and encouraging words. Be generous in showing your change of heart. If you can, choose something that relates to how you hurt your partner
2. Remember the importance of accumulating trustworthy post-hurt events. Repairs build trust. If you repeat the same hurt soon after a confession, it makes you seem insincere.

***Application of these principles.*** Write a journal entry confessing some marital offense that has happened. It could be something common like getting caught up in your own issues and not paying attention to your partner’s needs, or it could be something more difficult. All relationships have some offenses. You can confess this offense to God as well. Later, when the timing is right, read or give the letter to your partner.

Apology Languages

Similar to there being 5 different kinds of love languages, there also appears to be about 5 different kinds of apology languages.

1. **Expressing Regret** - If the person you’ve hurt has this language, they want to know “Do you understand how deeply your behavior has hurt me?” This apology language looks for hearing your apology, your understanding of the circumstances that lead to the hurt, and the comprehension about what exactly hurt them. It is best to say that you are sorry and explain specifically what you are sorry for.
2. **Accepting Responsibility** - If the person you are apologizing to has this language, they want you to accept the responsibility for what you did or said and acknowledge that it was wrong. Similar to the previous language, they hope that you understand the circumstances and your role in causing the hurt they experienced.
3. **Making Restitution** - If someone has this apology language, what they really want to know is “Do you still love me?” Your behavior seemed so unloving to them that they wonder how you could love them and do what you did. It is important to this person that you make amends and validate your love and care for them.
4. **Expressing Desire to Change** - When this is someone’s apology language, if your apology does not include a desire to change your behavior, then you have not truly apologized. Without a genuine expressed desire for change, they assume that the apology is merely a quick bandaid over a recurring wound, as without a change in behavior it will likely happen again. Whatever else you say, they do not see it as being sincere.
5. **Requesting Forgiveness** - If you offend someone who has this apology language, the words “Will you please forgive me?” are the words they want to hear. Requesting forgiveness is the way to touch their heart and is the way that feels sincere to them.

Find out what your apology language is [here.](https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/apology-language)

# Grace

You may have heard of the concept of grace, but perhaps you are unsure of how it relates to your relationship. Grace is an altruistic action of undeserved love from one person to another. It is given without expecting anything in return. It is similar to offering kindness, goodness, or mercy to another person who does not necessarily deserve it. Sometimes grace allows your partner to make mistakes, without the demand for change. Grace is acceptance of your partner for how he or she is made. It does not matter who offers the gift of grace first, but once it is given, it must be respected and protected or it will be hard to offer again. In fact, offering grace can be an act of trusting. Receiving grace requires trust as well. A grace-full relationship encourages trust to develop, and trust in return encourages more acts of grace.

***Is not grace just like forgiveness?*** Grace has some role in the forgiveness process. Grace is giving people good things they do not deserve, and mercy is not giving people consequences they do deserve. When a person offends, he or she legitimately deserves condemnation. So forgiveness involves mercy—not giving the deserved condemnation. However, forgiveness also gives something the person does not deserve (grace)—a gift of restored value. So forgiveness involves both grace and mercy. A spirit of grace may motivate the couple to forgive offenses more easily.

***Does grace mean you should accept mistreatment?*** It is important to recognize that giving one’s partner grace is not an excuse for accepting ongoing offense without considering the consequences of sin, which would be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2011) called “cheap grace.” Giving grace does not require you to be morally neutral. Rather, receiving grace should produce a sense of remorse and sorrow for one’s misdoings, which can be constructive (McMinn, Ruiz, Marx, Wright & Gilbert, 2006). Also, grace is not sufficient alone. Couples must give grace in the context of justice, which is the mutual commitment to fairness and equality in the marriage (Sells & Yarhouse, 2011). All relationships should provide a balance of both loving acts of grace and obligations (justice).

This intervention introduces to couples the idea that grace is not merely a theological concept but can be applied within their relationship. The intervention can be conducted within two or more separate sessions or condensed into one session. Grace can often seem like a vague concept. Grace has been defined in many ways even by Christian psychologists we know and trust. Sells and Yarhouse (2011) define grace as an undeserved gift while the Balswicks (Balswick & Balswick, 2006) define grace as to forgive and be forgiven. We define grace as an altruistic action of undeserved love. These sessions involve psychoeducation to help explain myths or misunderstandings about how grace applies to the couple’s relationship. A metaphor and activity for grace makes the concept more understandable. An imagery exercise, with both a religious-themed and standard version, is included as a powerful way to commemorate relational grace. Finally, open-ended discussion questions can help elicit specific, concrete examples of behaviors that communicate grace in the relationship, with homework assignments to implement the behaviors.

*Step 1: Psychoeducation about grace.*

Because the concept of grace is not familiar to everyone, information can be given to a couple with information about relational grace. The counselor must judge the best way to transmit the information to each couple.

*Step 2: Inspirational narrative.*

The therapist can use stories and examples to illustrate grace to the couple.
(For spiritual integration treatment) Some examples include the parables of the prodigal son or the Good Samaritan. Scriptures to discuss include Galatians 6:2, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” A movie clip pertaining to grace, such as the priest and the soldier carrying a burden up a mountain in *The Mission* would also make a good illustration.

(For secular treatment) Some examples include O. Henry’s fable “The Gift of the Magi,” which gives an example of grace. Media examples pertaining to grace, such as a selfish, hedonistic business owner having a change of heart which inspires him to rescue Jews from a Nazi camp in *Schindler’s List* or the priest’s mercy to thieving prisoner who would echo his grace and compassion towards others in *Les Misérables* would also make good illustrations.

The therapist can use their own clinical judgment to decide which illustration would resonate most with the couple. Whichever illustration the therapist chooses, a discussion with personal application questions relevant to the couple’s relationship should follow.

*Step 3: Discussion and application.*

The discussion and application are essential for this intervention to have an impact. Without a personal application to their relationship, it will do little good for the couple to merely understand the concept of grace. The tone should be conversational, with a practical eye to how the couple can apply this knowledge to their relationship.

1. Who are the people in your life that consistently exhibit these qualities of grace? What do the qualities look like?
2. Tell me your understanding and experience of unmerited gift-giving in your relationship. When have you shown these capacities toward each other? How did you know your partner was showing grace? How did you know your grace was received?
3. Identify something you think would be an area of tension for your partner in your relationship. When considering this discussion about grace, what might you now decide to extend to your partner when this tension comes up? What are some practical ways you can show grace to each other? How can you build a “grace-full relationship?”

*Step 4: Homework.*

You can use the grace handout and discuss their assignment.

**Grace**

Grace is an unmerited or undeserved gift offered from one person to another. It is given without expecting anything in return. It is similar to offering kindness, goodness, or mercy to another person who does not necessarily deserve it. Sometimes grace allows your partner to make mistakes, without the demand that he or she change. Grace is acceptance of your partner for who he or she is. It does not matter who offers the gift of grace first, but once it is given, it must be respected and protected, or it will be hard to offer again. In fact, offering grace can be an act of trust and receiving grace requires you to trust as well. A grace-full relationship encourages trust to develop, and trust, in return, encourages more acts of grace.

1. Think of your recurring conflict themes in your relationship and about your contribution to them. These are things *you* need grace for. These can be perpetual problems you introduce into your relationship that come up repeatedly, such as being messy, forgetful, having high expectations, any unpleasant personal habits, or personality issues.
2. Think about your recurrent conflict themes of your relationship in terms of what your partner needs grace for.
3. What are the mutual, reciprocating gifts that can be given to your partner around those themes? Write some ideas on the back of this paper.
4. During the week, share what you wrote down with your partner. This is not a time to discuss the problems or place blame, but simply communicate grace with each other.
5. Look for ways to give this gift of grace in your relationship.

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