

## Talk to Me! 6 Ways to Create Emotional Safety in your Relationship

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“Why didn’t you tell me?” “You never share with me!” “How come you are so quiet when I try to talk to you?” “Answer me!” “You’re so secretive!” “You never talk!” “Why don’t you ever tell me how you’re feeling?”

Have you said those things to your partner? Has your partner said any of the above to you? How about when you do decide to share and the other person reacts defensively (yells, cries, criticizes) leaving you to make comments such as:

“That’s why I don’t tell you anything!” “I can’t talk to you!” “That’s not what I meant” “I should’ve just kept my mouth shut!”

If the comments above sound familiar, if you’ve heard them or said them, chances are...at least one of you, or maybe both of you, do not feel entirely safe to share your emotions in your relationship. Creating emotional safety in a relationship allows both partners to feel:

- Safe to express themselves fully and authentically
- Safe to share dissatisfaction about something their partner did
- Safe to share sexual desires, displeasure, and fantasies
- Safe to share their personal insecurities and fears
- Safe to have a conversation without it escalating to a full blown argument
- Safe to share meaning that they can say any of the above without being met with yelling, name calling, blaming, shaming, exit language, and/or rejection

According to the merriam-webster dictionary the definition of safety is “freedom from harm or danger : the state of being safe. : the state of not being dangerous or harmful. : a place that is free from harm or danger : a safe place.”

A safe place requires that you do not feel as if you are at risk of harm or danger, and with emotional safety it means knowing that you will not be criticized, blamed, rejected, invalidated or dismissed by your partner.

Maslow believed that people’s behaviors are motivated by five different levels of needs. The first level is getting your physical needs met (food, clothing, shelter, etc), the second level is safety and security (emotional safety included), the third level is love and belonging, the fourth level is esteem (feeling accepted and valued by others, and by self), and the fifth level is self actualization.

In levels 2 through 4, an emphasis is placed on feeling emotionally safe, a sense of belonging and connection, and feeling loved and valued by others. If we think about that in the context of

our romantic relationships, it seems reasonable to believe that if we are not having those needs met, it will show up in our behavior in a negative or maladaptive way. If those needs are being met, the behavior will probably be more loving, trusting, and positive.

If your partner does not share with you, if your partner shuts down, if your partner finds it easier to talk to other people than to talk to you, instead of engaging in name calling and blaming and saying things such as “you’re secretive,” “you don’t know how to express yourself,” “you never talk,” “you’re such a coward,” “you don’t respect me,” etc, Turn inward and ask yourself:

- What am I doing or not doing that is causing my partner to not feel comfortable sharing with me?
- What can I do to show my partner that I am interested in what they want to share and I am committed to holding a safe space for them to express themselves fully?

While we can not take full ownership of another person’s feelings, what we can do is acknowledge and hold ourselves accountable for how we are showing up in the relationship. What are you doing to create safety for yourself and for your partner?

## **6 WAYS TO CREATE EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

**1) Listen non-defensively.** Listen to understand the emotions and feelings coming up for your partner and validate them. Having empathy is important, however even if you are struggling with feeling empathy you can still practice validation. Usually, when people do not share it is rooted in fear of being misunderstood or dismissed. Vulnerability is nakedness, and most people do not feel comfortable being vulnerable with someone they feel is a potential threat. If you want your partner to open up, create a space in which they will be able to do so.

Damage is done when you: get defensive, tell your partner not to feel the way they do, name call and/or blame, dismiss what they are feeling/sharing, change the subject, do not acknowledge or speak to their feelings, make overall invalidating comments.

Safety is created when you: validate their feelings, when you empathize with what they are sharing, when you listen non-judgmentally, when you do not internalize and make it about you, focus on trying to understand your partner’s feelings.

**2) Let go of toxic thoughts about your partner.** Rather than holding them to old labels you may have for your partner (overly sensitive, stubborn, combative, weak), open yourself to seeing them differently. Challenge your old thought patterns and narratives about your partner and about the relationship. For example, instead of thinking, “She feels like this because she is overly sensitive”, practice not labeling who she is or her emotions. If you hear your husband share his feelings, try not to jump to “of course he’s feeling this way, he never sees anyone else’s point of view”, but instead, challenge yourself to ask questions about what feelings are

coming up for him. As soon as you realize you are labeling your partner, identify it as a toxic thought, and make the decision to change it!

Damage is done when you: hold your partner to old negative labels of who they are, believe that they will never change, struggle to give your partner the benefit of the doubt.

Safety is created when you: give your partner an opportunity to show you something different, shift any negative/toxic thoughts to positive and loving thoughts, enter into the conversation being willing to experience them in a more positive light, practice trust.

**3) Body language and physical touch matter.** Body language matters a great deal in creating a safe space. Research indicates that anywhere between 55% – 90% of communication is non-verbal; in other words, it's pretty important. While words matter, body language matters just as much, if not more.

Damage is done when you: turn your back, roll your eyes, walk away, fold your arms, stand/sit at a distance, have a tense facial expression, sigh, etc.

Safety is created when you: turn towards your partner, give them eye contact, make facial expressions that show them they have your attention, sit/stand in close proximity, touch their hand. In other words, join them where they are.

**4) Emphasize and reinforce your commitment.** The most damaging reactions a partner can have is using exit language (I want out of this relationship, maybe we should break up, I think you should move out, I want a divorce), or shutting down/withdrawing emotionally. These two behaviors are extremely damaging as they lead the partner to feel unsafe, insecure, and may trigger old wounds/fear of abandonment. If you want to create a safe space, reminding yourself and your partner that you are in this together and committed to figuring things out is imperative to creating a safe space. Statements such as, "we really need to figure this out", "we are better than this", "we've got this", "I'm not going anywhere", "I may be feeling hurt right now, but that doesn't mean we are breaking up", all reinforce the fact that you are committed to your partner.

Damage is done when you: use exit language (break up, divorce, moving out, etc.), withdraw or shut down emotionally, give your attention to or talk to other people instead of addressing the issues within your relationship.

Safety is created when you: make "we" statements around resolutions, talk about future hopes and goals for the relationship, speak to the commitment such as "we will get through this," and statements that let your partner know you are committed to figuring things out and continuing to work on the relationship.

**5) Thank them.** Whenever your partner shares with you, regardless of the content and how it made you feel, thank your partner for opening up. Thank them for trusting you, thank them for being vulnerable in front of you, let them know that you appreciate learning more about them. It does not matter if you do not see eye to eye, what matters is that you trust one another enough to have the conversation.

Damage is done when you: do not acknowledge when your partner is vulnerable and has the courage to share something with you that may have been difficult to share and/or you make negative/dismissive comments about what they share.

Safety is created when you: acknowledge that being vulnerable is not easy, thank them for trusting you enough to share their feelings, validate what they have shared with you, and encourage them to continue to open up and know that they will be met with love and understanding.

**6) Be consistent – with your words and actions.** Consistency builds trust, because you know what to expect, words and actions are aligned, you learn you can count on your partner. Be consistent with your partner - if you say you are going to do something, do it. If your behaviors and your words are not consistent with one another, it will be hard for your partner to trust you. If you are consistently inconsistent, you are ultimately sending a message to your partner that you can not be trusted.

Damage is done when you: make promises that you do not keep, treat your partner lovingly and shower them with attention one day, and then have limited interaction with them the next day for what feels to them like no reason, you tell your partner that they can call you anytime and you will be there for them and when they call you are not available/do not pick up.

Damage is done when you commit to do something and do not follow through. Inconsistency and unpredictability cause people to be constantly on guard which is a major cause of anxiety and stress, making it nearly impossible for someone to feel safe.

Safety is created when you: follow through on what you say you are going to do, keep your word, establish trust by being consistent. Be yourself at all times and if you put your best foot forward in the beginning of the relationship, then put your best foot forward throughout your relationship. Consistency sends a message to others that you can be trusted.

Remember, in a relationship, if either of you do not feel emotionally safe to communicate authentically or show vulnerability, then you both play a part in what has been created. When emotional safety is created, conversations are smoother, trust is established, connection feels stronger, and sex is better! The great news is that at any point, the two of you can make a decision to create safety in your relationship, as long as you are both committed to the process and take ownership of your individual roles.