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PREPARATION FOR COMMUNICATION WORKSHEETS

These worksheets are designed to help with the steps that come before actually starting a conversation about something that is important to you. If it is hard for you to get clear on what you want to say, say it clearly, stay with it, stay calm, or stay on track and warm when someone else reacts emotionally to something you say, these worksheets will help. Included are the following:

- **Preparing to Communicate**
Helps you get clear on what you want to express and start the conversation with a step-by-step guide, complete with examples.
- **Rehearsing Tough Conversation**
Addresses the anxiety you may feel related to an upcoming hard conversation and prepares you to respond well to any reaction, response, or rebuttal.



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PREPARING TO COMMUNICATE

Are you considering communicating with someone about your thoughts and feelings? If so, that's great. If you sometimes find it difficult to gather your thoughts, stay steady if your partner starts to feel distressed, or fully express what you want to say, it will help to prepare for the conversation ahead of time. The following are some questions to help you sort out your thoughts, followed by some suggestions for how to express yourself in ways that make it more likely you will feel heard and understood. Read through all the steps before you start the conversation with your partner because there are a lot of ways you can prepare, particularly if it is a conversation you are worried about. Even if you don't do all the steps, it will be helpful to read them.

Step 1: Get Clear

It is helpful if you can be clear about your topic, as well as your thoughts and feelings about it, before you begin talking with your partner. I recommend working through this on your own in writing, to get clear about what your topic is and what you think, feel, believe, perceive, desire, etc., about that topic. Ask yourself these questions, and write down the answers:

- What is the most pressing topic? (If there are several, write them down and pick just one for now. You have a lifetime to communicate, so bite off just one topic at a time.)
- What do I *think* about this topic?
- What *feelings* come up for me about this?
- On a scale of 1–10, with 1 being hardly at all and 10 being very much, how important is the topic for me?
- What beliefs are coming into this issue for me?



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- What assumptions am I making about my partner or my partner's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, or beliefs?
- What is my goal in having this conversation (e.g., my partner hears me, my partner understands me, my partner and I can come to a decision that works for both of us, etc.)?
- What are my desires about this topic? What do I want to have happen, and why do I want that?
- What stories or meanings am I making up about this topic? In other words, what does it mean to me that we are talking about this? What would it mean if we agreed? What would it mean if we didn't agree?
- Do I have perceptions about this that my partner might not share? What does my partner need to know about my perceptions of events to understand what's going on for me?

Step 2: Share Your Goal

Start by telling your partner your goal in having the conversation. Do you want them to just listen? Do you want them to show you that they understand what you're saying? Do you want help thinking something through? Are you hoping to make a decision for yourself? Are you hoping the two of you can make a decision together about something that affects both of you? Telling your partner up front what you are hoping to get out of having this discussion will help them understand where you're coming from and make it more likely that the conversation will be productive.

If you have just started talking about an issue, I recommend that you do not attempt to come to a resolution or make a decision yet. An early step would be to express your perspective as clearly as you can, asking your partner to hear you, help you clarify your thoughts, and hopefully understand you better.



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Then ask your partner to do the same: help them get clear and express themselves more fully, and show that you understand them. Decision-making is a much later step, so don't confuse things by asking for a decision in the early stages.

Step 3: Stick to Your Topic

When you communicate, it is often helpful to separate what you are expressing about your perceptions from your feelings and the meanings you are making. It is also helpful to stick with just one thought at a time. Remember, in the course of a long-term relationship, you have ample time to explore and reexplore topics; you can say more or go off on a tangent later. For now, figure out what you want to express to your partner about one concise topic. Regarding that topic, what do you want your partner to understand about your perceptions, your feelings, and the meanings you are making? Writing this down now will help you be concise later, during the actual conversation.

Here's an example: "Yesterday morning, when I came into the bathroom and there were towels on the floor, I assumed you had left them there and I felt angry and frustrated. The meaning I made was that you take me for granted and think it is my job to pick up after you." Here's another example: "The other day, I had a conversation with George about his open relationship. I felt excited about what he was saying because he seems really happy, and it sounds like he and his wife are doing really well and having a lot of fun. I think I would like to explore whether we could have an open relationship, but I'm concerned that you might not like that idea."



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Step 4: Acknowledge Your Perspective

Make sure you have taken responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perceptions, and preferences and have acknowledged that your partner might be in a different place, without making them feel bad about it. You will have a much easier time talking about deep topics with high levels of grace and low levels of drama if you frame beliefs, perceptions, and opinions as such, rather than assuming that everyone agrees with you (or should agree with you) about universal truths. In fact, for the purposes of having tough conversations about charged topics with people you care about, I recommend striking the word “truth” from the vocabulary and instead talking about theories, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, preferences or desires, and perceptions.

The following are some examples of how this shift might look in real life:

- Version 1: We have to go to church.
- Version 2: I believe in God, and I hold the opinion that it is important that we go to church. I have a strong preference that I, at least, attend church, even if you don't. My perception is that many positive things come from going to church. My hope is that if we go together, we will grow together in some important ways as a result of having shared experiences. I imagine us discussing things that happen at church during dinner. In my imagination, we might sometimes disagree during those discussions, but we would still feel cozy, connected, and curious while discussing things.



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- Version 1: Polyamory is a sin, causes harm, and destroys relationships.
- Version 2: I believe polyamory is a sin, and I have an opinion that polyamory can cause harm, but that might be more of a fear than an opinion. Also, it is my perception that Bob and Sally's open relationship has been bad for both of them. My theory is that if they hadn't opened their relationship, they would still be together now. When I think about opening our relationship, a lot of feelings come up, including fear of losing the connection we have. I am afraid that the fact that you are interested in exploring polyamory means that you don't find me attractive anymore or are tired of our relationship.

- Version 1: We need to talk about opening our relationship.
- Version 2: I believe I am a person who experiences frequent attractions; historically, it has been true. I predict that at some point in the future, I will develop a crush on someone other than you, and that I might want to act on it. For that reason, I'd like to discuss that possibility with you now, so I can understand your thoughts about it and how you would like me, and us, to handle it if and when it happens. To me, discussing polyamory doesn't mean we have to act on it. First, I would like to think about it, ideally with you, so we are on the same page and I'm not having a lot of private fantasy-type thoughts about it that you aren't aware of.

- Version 1: What did I do to make you angry yesterday morning?
- Version 2: My perception is that yesterday morning you were angry with me. As I remember it, you threw the dish towel on the floor and slammed the door as you were leaving, which to me suggests you were angry with me. My point in bringing this up is to find out what was actually happening for you. Were you angry with me, and, if so, why?



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- Version 1: I need to stay home tonight.
- Version 2: My preference would be to stay in tonight and have a quiet evening at home. My perception is that I haven't done that for a long time, and I miss it. It feels important to me because I've been stressed and anxious all week. I would love to relax and not have to think about anything tonight.

Now it's your turn. Write down some things you might want to express to someone else, and review each statement carefully. Make sure you are acknowledging that your perceptions are yours alone, rather than the truth. Identify your preferences, rather than calling them needs. If something feels important, see if you can figure out what emotion or feeling goes with it, and figure out a way to express that without upping the emotional ante by raising your voice, issuing an ultimatum, or describing something as a need.



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REHEARSING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Do you anticipate a difficult conversation? If so, you can work through a lot of it on your own, using a method involving two chairs. Here's how it works.

Set up two chairs that face each other. Sit in one chair, facing the other, and pretend you're looking at your partner (or the person you want to have the conversation with) in the other chair. Express what's on your mind to the best of your ability. Don't worry about perfection; just spit it out as best you can, but do make an effort to say it as if you were actually talking to the other person and bringing your best self to the project. Now switch chairs. Be your partner, and respond in the way you think they will respond. Switch back to your own chair and respond back to your partner from a grounded, warm, empathic place. Switch chairs again, and be your partner again, responding to what you just said to them.

As this exercise continues, make sure you respond from your partner's chair in the ways you are most worried they might respond, so you can have the experience of figuring out how to handle your own worst-case scenarios. Continue with this exercise until you have prepared a balanced and values-informed response to the things you are afraid they will say. If you get stuck and can't think of a way to respond that will be helpful, get some ideas from a wise friend, coach, or therapist. This exercise should result in you feeling prepared for any response and much less anxious about how the conversation will go.