Couples Communication:
Participant Handout

KAISER PERMANENTE®

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Session 1: Building Blocks for Effective Connecting

The Foundation for Connecting

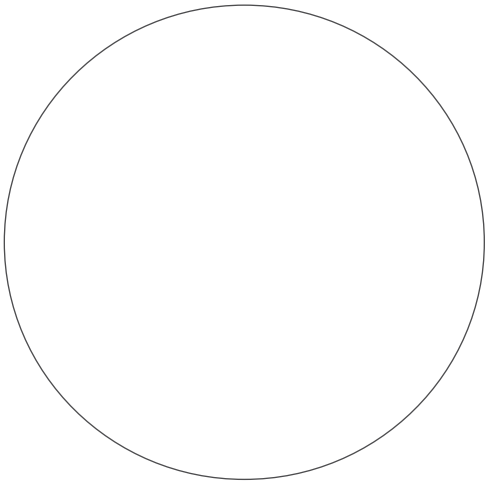
These building blocks represent key elements that help keep our partner relationship strong and satisfying. By using these building blocks consistently, we build a solid base for our relationship. This keeps us connected and fulfilled. It enables us to get through life's conflicts and problems together.

Building Block: Taking Time

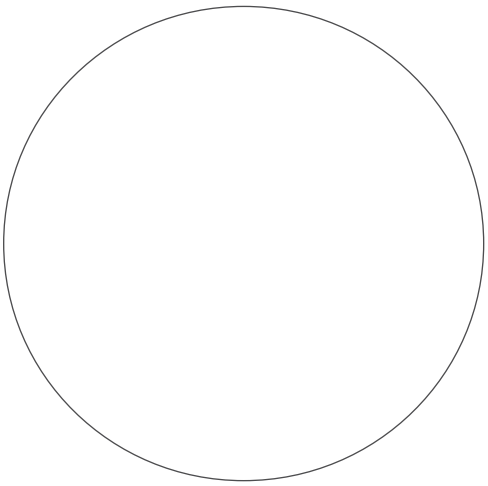
Couples Exercise: Time Maps

Divide each circle (below) into "pie" segments, based on the (estimated) percent of time you spend on the following activities (use numbers or letters to label each segment easily):

Work or school (including commute)
Household chores
Kids
Volunteer or community service
Exercise
Friends
Extended family
Couples' activities (fun, making plans and decisions, romance)
Personal time



When We First Met

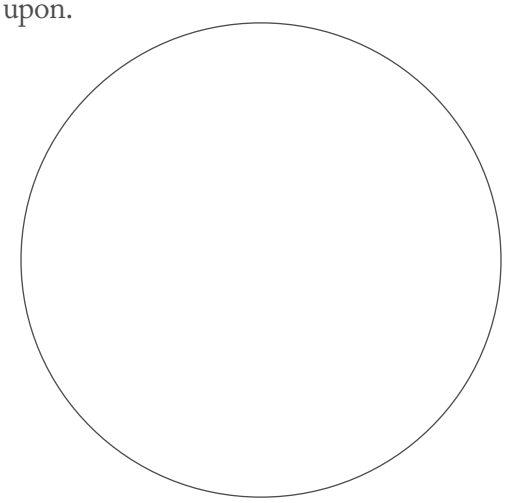


Now

Share your map with your partner and notice how each of you SEES the way time was spent when you first met and how it is spent now.

- What did you learn about how time investment is affecting your relationship?
- Is there one small change you can make to increase your time together?

Together, make another circle. Rethink how you would like to spend time together. Draw pie segments for the activities and timeframes you agree upon.



How We'd Like It

Reuniting at the End of the Day: Guidelines

It's important for couples to make time to reunite at the end of the day. It's a way to stay connected and current with your partner's life. All couples want to feel safe with each other when sharing personal thoughts. Here are some guidelines for creating the safety and closeness we all desire.

As you use these guidelines, you'll feel closer and more positive about each other. Each of you can become an oasis for the other, especially when life is busy or stressful. When life is going well, your reuniting time will still be a joy.

Important note: This is NOT a time to talk about conflicts in your relationship. It's a time to catch up with each other.

Pick a time when you won't be disturbed. You need only about 30 minutes, with each partner having 15 uninterrupted minutes to talk about their day. Do this every day!

Just listen. This allows your partner to feel understood and validated. They may not feel this way if you jump in with advice while they're speaking.

Use active listening. Show genuine interest in what your partner is saying. Encourage them by nodding your head and using brief positive words (such as "uh-huh," "really," etc.). Keep eye contact with your partner to help you stay focused on them.

Keep it simple. Share the main points of your day. If you include too much information, it can be difficult to follow. Your partner may miss what you want to share.

Take your partner's side. Whether you agree with what your partner is saying or not, always take their side. Listen and empathize with them, instead of criticizing or taking another person's side. This creates the safety we all long for in close relationships.

You are partners, no matter what. If your partner is going through an unusually difficult time, assure them that you'll see it through together. Partners support each other.

Show empathy and validate your partner. This means showing that you understand your partner's point of view even if you don't agree. Let your partner know you understand by saying something like "I can see why you decided to do that" or "That would've made me angry, too." If you don't agree, don't say it. Trust will grow by accepting your partner as they are, unconditionally. Isn't that what we all want?

Be affectionate. Telling your partner that you love them, along with hugs, kisses, and other affectionate touch, will do a lot to deepen your connection.

Home Practice

Sticky Note Exercise

- Grab a pack of sticky notes and put one aside for each day in the next week.
- Each day during the next week, leave a sticky note in an easy-to-see but unexpected place for your partner to find (such as the bathroom mirror, pillow, car rearview mirror).
- On the note, write one of the words (see the list, below) for a strength you appreciate about your partner. Or write a note about something else you appreciate about them. Examples: "I love how thoughtful you are for doing the dishes"; "I love your eyes"; "Your sense of humor cracks me up."
- Focus on leaving a note for your partner each day (not on "keeping score" about how many notes you've gotten from them!).

This list can help you think about your partner's strengths. If you like, use this for your daily sticky notes.

Cheerful	Intelligent	Sensitive	Athletic	Brave
Generous	Elegant	Coordinated	Thoughtful	Graceful
Playful	Strong	Loyal	Gracious	Truthful
Sexy	Exciting	Caring	Energetic	Great Friend
Full of Plans	Imaginative	Decisive	Thrifty	Creative
Attractive	Committed	Fun	Shy	Vulnerable
Expressive	Funny	Interesting	Involved	Supportive
Affectionate	Reserved	Active	Considerate	Careful
Handsome	Rich	Organized	Adventurous	Receptive
Dependable	Lively	Reliable	Responsible	Calm
Great Parent	Virile	Nurturing	Great Partner	Warm
Gentle	Sweet	Assertive	Kind	Protective
Powerful	Witty	Practical	Tender	Lusty
Beautiful	Totally Silly	Flexible	Relaxed	Understanding

Caring Behaviors

- Do one or more Caring Behavior (from your partner's list) this week.

Reuniting at the End of the Day (Taking Time)

- Do this every evening!

Fun Night (Taking Time)

- Go on a date (for at least 3 hours) this week.
- See the list "50 Things You Can Do with Your Partner" for ideas on activities and topics to discuss.

Pleasurable Activities: 50 Things You Can Do with Your Partner

Exercise. It's free!	Take a walk in a quaint downtown area.
Ride your bike or walk across a bridge.	Go out for an ice cream or yogurt.
Go to a scenic place to walk or hike.	Have breakfast in bed.
Pack a picnic & take it to the park/backyard.	Eat dinner by candlelight.
Go camping for a weekend.	Meet for lunch during the work week.
Go to a local museum that interests you both.	Walk along the beach in your bare feet.
Stretch.	Take a train ride somewhere fun.
Go window shopping at your favorite stores.	Try antique shopping.
Volunteer for a cause you believe in.	Go for a boat ride or ferry ride.
Walk or walk the dog.	Try a new restaurant.
Take a class (pottery, yoga, etc.).	Take funny pictures of each other.
Work on a gardening project.	Start a box of good memories.
Go to the movies or watch a DVD at home.	Start a journal (for both of you to write in).
Have morning coffee.	Make a photo album.
Sign up for a bowling league.	Refinish a piece of furniture.
Play some miniature golf (without the kids).	Go to a pet store.
Take a drive.	Make an exciting dish for dinner.
Take a walk in a different neighborhood.	Join a sports team in your community.
Give each other shoulder massages.	Plant a vegetable garden.
Go to a local national or state park for a weekend.	Surprise your partner with their favorite dessert after dinner!
Watch a sunset.	Go out for root-beer floats.
Buy a book on relationships and read it together at night.	Try a new sport.
See a play at a local theater.	Play a board or card game you both enjoy.
Start a collection (rocks, leaves).	Go to a bookstore or library.
Take a day to go wine tasting.	Kiss!

Session 2: Empathetic, Active Listening and Expressing Ourselves

Mirroring (Paraphrasing)

Restate what your partner (the Speaker) has said to be sure you've understood their message correctly. This lets your partner know they were heard and understood. Start your response with a phrase such as:

"It seems like you're saying…"

"What I think you've said so far is…"

"What I understand is that…"

"Did I get that right?"

Repeat this process (if needed) until you clearly understand what your partner is saying. Ask, "Am I getting what you mean?"

To deepen the conversation, the Listener can ask if there's anything else the Speaker would like to add.

Validating

This means affirming that you understand your partner's world. You're willing to "stand in their shoes" and see their viewpoint.

You're basically saying, "You make sense to me." You may or may not agree with your partner, but you hear and respect them.

We all want to be understood and respected. Our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs make so much sense to us that we can't believe that others may not share them. This is when partners can get stuck. Many conflicts don't get resolved because each person insists on their viewpoint and dismisses their partner's.

Each partner's perspective is valid. After listening, you can start responding to your partner by saying something like:

"I can understand that because…"

"It makes sense to me, given that you…"

"I can see what you're saying…"

Empathy

Here we're acknowledging our partner's feelings. You can express empathy with phrases such as:

"I can imagine that you might be feeling…"

"I understand how you must feel…"

Active Listening: Key Points

Show your partner you're listening and interested:

- Face your partner and maintain eye contact.
- Eliminate distractions. Don't focus on other activities or tasks (turn off the TV, phone, etc.).
- Use "encouragers" such as nodding your head, briefly saying "uh-hum," "yes," "really!" and "go on."

Work toward an attitude of acceptance:

- Focus on understanding the facts and point-of-view your partner is expressing. (Remember: You can understand even if you don't agree.)
- Listen for feelings (between the lines, if necessary).

Put your empathy and understanding into words:

- Repeat in your own words (paraphrase) what your partner said, so they know they were heard and understood.
- Validate their thoughts and beliefs.
- Express empathy for their feelings.

Only offer feedback to the Speaker, or say what you (as Listener) feel or think, after you've done these 3 active listening steps. Understand your partner before you respond.

Building Block: Soft Starts and "I" Statements

Soft Starts

The way a conversation starts can set the tone for how it unfolds and ends. Starting a conversation softly, especially if it's on a difficult subject, increases the chances of communicating effectively. This doesn't mean all conflicts will be solved, but you can have the conversation without hurting your partner or damaging your relationship. Tips for starting softly:

- Plan ahead before bringing up an issue. Think through your own ideas. Set a time to talk when you and your partner won't be interrupted.
- Start by showing respect in your tone of voice and body language.
- Start with something positive. This can make a huge difference in how your partner receives what you say. It also sets the tone for your conversation.
- Focus on how the issue makes you feel, instead of blaming or judging your partner.
- Describe the issue in factual, neutral, unexaggerated language using only the present or most recent example.
- Make specific requests for change in a positive way.

"I" Statements

These are made up of 3 main steps:

Statement of feelings: I feel _____ (express feeling)

- State the feeling in one word (use the Feeling Charts to assist you): "I feel anxious and worried when..."

Statement of experience: When _____ (just the facts).

- Describe the situation, just the facts: "When you get home two hours later than you said..."

Statement of request: I wish/want/would like _____ (request)

- State your positive solution (I want/wish/or would like): "I would like you to call me when you know you'll be late."
  - Deal with one issue at a time.
  - Be specific.
  - Ask for a behavioral change.
  - Ask partner for ideas/suggestions.

Couples Activity: Soft Starts

Together, write a soft start for 2 of 3 situations below. Make at least 1 of them an "I" statement.

Partner A agreed to an invitation to their parents' home without checking with Partner B. Partner B is upset.

Partner A is consistently late picking up the children from daycare. Partner B often ends up dropping everything at the last moment to pick them up.

Partner A has agreed to take responsibility for walking the dogs but has been inconsistent, skipping days at a time. This is resulting in behavioral problems with the dog. Partner B would like Partner A to follow through on the agreement to walk the dogs.

Building a Vocabulary for Feelings

In expressing our feelings, it helps to use words that refer to specific emotions, rather than words that are vague or general. For example, if we say, "I feel good about that," the word *good* could mean happy, excited, relieved, or a number of other emotions. Words such as *good* and *bad* prevent the listener from connecting easily with what we might actually be feeling.

Feelings we're likely to feel when our needs are being met.

Words of **happiness**: I feel…

Excited	Cheerful	Pleased	Complete	Comfortable	Satisfied
Relieved	Optimistic	Content	Restored	Touched	Joyful
Lucky	Lighthearted	Delighted	Hopeful		

Feelings we're likely to feel when our needs are not being met.

Words of **unhappiness**: I feel…

Sad	Lost	Exhausted	Tearful	Bitter	Hurt
Heavy	Hopeless	Bored	Lonely	Pessimistic	Crushed
Guilty	Regretful	Burdened	Worn Out	Wounded	Helpless
Miserable	Depressed	Tired	Negative	Discouraged	Disappointed

Words of **anger**: I feel…

Angry	Annoyed	Vengeful	Aggressive	Disgusted	Frustrated
Insulted	Mad	Impatient	Irritable	Enraged	Exasperated

Words of **anxiety**: I feel…

Cautious	Worried	Afraid	Caught	Hesitant	Embarrassed
Distrustful	Anxious	Rushed	Panicky	Suspicious	Threatened
Self-conscious					

Other **assorted feelings:** I feel…

Confident	Curious	Envious	Obstinate	Interested	Apologetic
Determined	Confused	Mischievous	Puzzled	Skeptical	Mystified

Home Practice

Sticky Notes (Seeing Our Partner in a Positive Light)

- Continue to leave a sticky note in an easily visible but unexpected place for your partner to find (bathroom mirror, pillow, rearview mirror).
- The note will have a strength or something else you appreciate about your partner (e.g., I love how thoughtful you were when you did the dishes, I love your eyes, Your sense of humor cracks me up).
- Important: Don't "keep score." Just focus on leaving the notes.

Fun Night (Taking Time)

- Spend at least 3 hours together on a date this week.
- Refer to the list of "50 Things You Can Do with Your Partner," if needed.

Reuniting at the End of the Day (Taking Time)

- Do this every evening!
- Each partner gets 5 to 15 minutes of uninterrupted time to talk about the events of the day.
- This is not the time to talk about conflicts.
- Remember: Couples who know each other well tend to be happier in their relationship.

Active Listening and Soft Starts

- Practice the 3 parts of active listening this coming week.
- Be aware of any listening blocks and try not to use them.
- Practice using soft starts. Be sure to include "I" statements in your practice.

Optional: More Practice on Communication

- Complete the "More Practice on Communication" exercises in this handout to develop a deeper understanding of your communication skills.

More Practice on Communication (Optional)

Looking at Communication Strengths

1) Three of my strengths in communication are:

2) Three of my partner's strengths in communication are:

Understanding Barriers to Communication

1) One way that my partner and I **differ in our communication style** or preference is:

2) One **goal** I have for working with this difference is:

3) One way that I **block listening** is:

4) One **goal** I have to eliminate this block to my listening is:

Session 3: Managing Stress and Anger

The Relaxation Response: The Antidote to the Stress Response

The sympathetic nervous system activates our body's stress response. This is a complex emergency system that evolved to help us run, fight, or hide when in danger. When we're in fight-or-flight mode, it's nearly impossible to think clearly. We just react.

The parasympathetic nervous system counterbalances our stress response. It activates our "Relaxation Response." This slows our heart rate and breathing, reduces blood pressure, releases muscle tension, and allows deep relaxation.

The Relaxation Response helps us manage stress. As our physical reactions calm down, we're able to access the rational, creative functions of our mind and emotions.

By practicing the relaxation exercises described in this handout, you'll be able to activate your Relaxation Response when you need it. When you've reduced or stopped your stress response, problem solving becomes possible. We're more able to deal with relationship conflicts when we feel calm and relaxed.

The exercises are simple and easy. Activating our Relaxation Response isn't difficult. But we do need to practice daily, since it isn't an automatic response like fight-or-flight. With practice we can quickly access the Relaxation Response when challenging issues come up.

Building Block: Stress Management Practice Techniques

Five Mini-Relaxations

You can do these exercises anywhere and anytime.

Neck and Shoulder Release. Take a deep breath in and bring your attention to your head, neck, and shoulders. Hold the breath, and then exhale gently (sighing out through your mouth can feel good). Breathe in again and gently raise your shoulders toward your ears. As you breathe out, imagine all the tension in your neck, shoulders and back leaving through this breath. Allow your shoulders to drop slightly as you exhale. Repeat.

Breathing to a Count. Inhale as you count to six, taking a slow, deep breath. Hold for a few counts, as long as it feels comfortable. Then breathe out slowly as you count to six. Repeat. Breathe in and out through your nose.

Cleansing Breath.

Step 1: Inhale slowly through your nose as you count to six, then exhale through your mouth. As you exhale, blow gently as if blowing on a candle flame. Blow so slowly that the candle only flickers but doesn't go out. Repeat.

Step 2: Inhale slowly through your nose as you count to six; then exhale through your mouth. This time, strongly blow out the imaginary candle, blowing out as much tension as possible.

Tense, Hold, Release. Breathe in and tense all your body's muscles (as much as possible), all at once. Hold your breath, then slowly breathe out, letting all the tension go. Repeat this several times.

Note: This exercise is not recommended for anyone with fibromyalgia or other chronic musculoskeletal pain.

Relaxing Sigh. Sit or stand up straight. Breathe in, and hold. Exhale, sighing deeply. Exaggerate the "Sigh of Relief" as the air rushes from your body: "Ahhhhh…" Repeat 2 times.

Relaxation Methods

- Try deep breathing, 3 to 4 times.
- Stop what you're doing and rest for 10 minutes.
- Practice progressive relaxation.
- Listen to a guided relaxation for 20 minutes. Use an app such as Calm, or other audio recording.
- Practice body stretches or yoga.

Mind-Clearing Exercises

- Lie on the floor with your feet up on a chair. Place a cool washcloth on your face. Focus on a peaceful word, thought, prayer, or image. Continue for 5 minutes.
- Read inspirational thoughts or poems.
- Stop living in the future and focus on something pleasant happening in the present.
- Practice changing "shoulds" (judgments) to "preferences" (more neutral).

Improve Your Physical Self-Care

- Treat yourself! Take a nap or a hot bath. Get a massage or a haircut.
- Get regular exercise. Aim for 30 to 60 minutes of brisk activity (walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, basketball) on most days of the week.
- Change one unhealthy eating habit. (Examples: eat breakfast, reduce or stop use of caffeine or alcohol, eat more slowly and while sitting down.)
- Pay attention to pain or illness. Get the health care you need. Take care of yourself.

Routines and Attitudes to Keep Stress Levels Low

- Schedule regular pleasant times you can count on (with friends, your partner, and your children).
- Practice saying daily positive appreciations with your partner, your children, and yourself. Discover and talk about each of your successes and what's working well.
- Have consistent family meetings or discussions to "check in" with each other, share feelings and experiences, and resolve difficulties. Include a positive activity at the beginning and end of each meeting.

On-the-Spot Stress Managers

Body Scan

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes (or lie down, if possible).
- Begin to bring your attention to the sensations in your body.
- Slowly move your attention from your head to your toes.
- Notice what you feel in each area of your body. If you feel tension, imagine yourself breathing in relaxation to that and letting it go as you breathe out. You may want to gently move the tense area, allowing it to relax.
- Scan your body once again, noticing any changes and letting go even further.
- Take a few deep breaths.
- Gently stretch and open your eyes.

Deep Breathing

- Sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Direct your attention to your breathing as it flows in and out.
- Allow all thoughts and sensations to disappear as you concentrate fully on your breath. Imagine any unwanted thoughts or feelings leaving your body with each breath out, and relaxation and calm entering your body with each breath in.
- Say to yourself phrases such as: "I am relaxing and letting go." "I am feeling very comfortable." "My breath is calm and regular."
- Feel yourself relax even deeper, into a safe and peaceful place.
- Prepare to open your eyes, bringing with you a feeling of calm and relaxation.

Visualizing a Special Place

- Relax, breathe deeply, and close your eyes.
- Imagine yourself in a beautiful, relaxing place: at home, the beach, the mountains, or any place that you enjoy.
- Imagine this place in detail: the smells, sounds, and colors. Let yourself get comfortable in this spot. Just for a moment let go of all your stresses.

  You might want to use this time to imagine yourself relaxing during a stressful workday (mentally rehearse this). Or imagine one of your current challenges working out just as you'd like it to.
- Continue to breathe deeply and enjoy your special place.
- Take another deep breath, stretch, and gently open your eyes.

Self-Massage

- Massage your scalp as if washing your hair. This relieves muscle tension and stimulates blood flow to your head, allowing more oxygen to reach your brain.
- Rub the back of your head at the base of the skull where you feel a large bump. This is where the neck muscles insert, so by rubbing this area, those muscles relax.
- Firmly massage the area around both temples on the side of your head. If you find tender areas, give them special, gentle attention.
- Place one hand on each side of your neck. Run them up and down with firm pressure.
- Run your hands down your neck to both of your shoulders and squeeze the muscles. Repeat a few times.
- Use your fingertips in circular motions to get deep into the muscles along your shoulder.
- Give yourself a big hug and squeeze the muscles at the top of your shoulders.

H.A.L.T. Stress

The next time you feel tension or stress, "halt" it by asking yourself the 4 questions listed here. Be sure to use the suggested coping response BEFORE taking any action on the stressful issue.

Ask yourself:	Suggested Coping Response:
Am I **h**ungry?	Get something nutritious to eat.
Am I **a**ngry?	Let someone know how you feel.
Am I **l**onely?	Make some social contacts.
Am I **t**ired?	Get enough sleep to feel refreshed.

How Anger Blocks Feelings

Anger mobilizes your body to prepare you to fight or flee. Anger also triggers hormonal changes that block your awareness of feelings.

These days when people disagree, we need to resolve the conflict instead of winning a physical battle. So we need to be aware of our feelings and think about the conflict in relation to our feelings. This enables you to resolve conflict while protecting and enhancing your relationships and your own emotional health.

Intense anger prevents positive conflict resolution by:

- Giving you the illusion of being powerful. Suddenly you don't doubt yourself. You feel like you can do what needs to be done. You don't feel neglected or insignificant.
- Blocking unwelcome feelings such as fear and guilt. Anger drives you forward, to attack and push away the source of pain. In the moment of "combat," there's no room for feelings that could slow you down. This is important in actual battle, but very destructive in relationships.
- Allowing you to forget the other person's needs. Their pain doesn't matter. All that counts is your pain and your needs.
- Giving you conviction that you're right. Anger strengthens the feeling that whatever you do is justified. It temporarily suspends your sense of doing wrong or feeling sad. This interferes with good judgment.

Anger can substitute for other feelings that are more difficult to experience, such as:

Guilt	Hurt
Loss	Being trapped or helpless
Insignificance	Embarrassment, shame
Emptiness	Being bad, wrong, unworthy
Anxiety or fear	Frustration (sour grapes)

In the heat of conflict it may feel easier to fall back on using anger to block feelings. But this makes it harder to take more appropriate action, such as:

- Dealing with the source of your fear
- Recognizing your "inner critic" that tells you you're bad or worthless
- Examining why you feel guilty
- Facing loss
- Saying what hurts or bothers you
- Problem-solving
- Connecting with others who can offer support

Personal Costs of Anger

Most people are unaware of what the real costs of anger are, and how it impacts our health, relationships, and overall success and satisfaction in life.

The physiological costs of anger

- Stress response (fight-or-flight) activation
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Cardiovascular disease (hostile, type A personality)
- Digestive disorders

The body's response to anger

- Chronic anger contributes to hypertension. It increases production of norepinephrine (stress hormone) that causes blood vessels to constrict.
- The relationship of hypertension to unexpressed anger has been reconfirmed by multiple research studies since 1942.
- People with normal blood pressure are much less likely to have chronic suppressed (unexpressed) anger.
- People with type A personalities have high levels of ambition, aggressiveness, and hostility. While this can have some advantages for career success, type A people are twice as likely to have heart attacks as type B people. Type Bs generally know how to relax and aren't chronically angry or hostile.

How Anger Damages Relationships

Chronic anger can cost us the ability to feel good about ourselves, and limit intimacy and fulfillment in our relationships with others.

This can result in:

- Use of anger to influence the behavior of others
- Defensiveness, rigidity, and resistance in relationships
- Social isolation
- Risky or addictive behaviors that block intimacy and taking responsibility
- Verbal aggression and blame

People on the receiving end of anger may try to cope by:

- Shutting down emotionally or becoming numb
- Withdrawing physically and emotionally or limiting their responses
- Counterattacking by criticizing and becoming hypersensitive
- Harboring deep animosity or secretly seeking revenge

Other interpersonal costs:

- People resent being controlled or coerced by the angry person. They'll become defensive (in the ways listed above).
- People soon find ways to avoid your controlling behavior and undermine its effects.
- Chronic anger makes it hard to express emotions, even though doing this is an important part of healthy communication.
- The cycle of isolation many angry people experience can reinforce low self-esteem and loneliness.

Understanding Anger

- Anger is a feeling just like any other feeling. It isn't pathological.
- Anger is often influenced by stress levels, trigger thoughts, misperceptions, past experiences, blood sugar levels, and personal belief systems.
- Anger is a subjective reaction to a situation. It can be useful when it provides clues to problems that need solving.
- Anger is a feeling; aggression is an action. You can choose your actions. Verbal aggression can emotionally hurt the recipient and your relationship. It doesn't leave visible marks like physical aggression does.
- Problem-solving and negotiating with others leads to more satisfactory outcomes than blaming does. Taking personal responsibility for your life is better than blaming others.
- If you've ever had a thought, feeling, or impulse that you didn't act on, you already know a basic step for anger management.
- Taming anger involves reducing distress, replacing trigger thoughts, or both.

Building Block: Managing Anger

- You can try these ways of dealing with difficult situations. Find what works for you.

Time-Out Contract

- This is the most effective anger management technique. Agreeing to use time-outs to stop discussions when they become judgmental and abrasive is the most helpful action a couple can take. It's like putting on the brakes on a runaway car so you can stay safe.
- Temporarily stepping away from your discussion gives you time to unhook from the fight-or-flight reactions of your primitive brain. As you calm down, you can access your clearer, more rational brain functions. This allows you to come up with creative options to help resolve the conflict.

Time-Out Signals

- Body: sweating, tight gut, surge of adrenaline
- Thoughts: hot thoughts, trigger thoughts
- Actions: pacing the floor, making a fist, raising your voice

If you have any of the above and can't stop the signals **immediately**, take a time-out.

When two people commit to changing their relationship's anger patterns, they can make a contract. Here's a framework for making changes that will benefit you both.

Time-Out Rules

1) Come up with a word (time out, veto, pause, etc.) or hand signal that tells your partner you're calling a time out. You'll pick this signal or word with your partner, in class.
2) As soon as the word or hand signal is used by either partner, ALL talking stops—not one more word.
3) Both parties walk away for 1 hour, exactly. Time out is NOT used to avoid difficult discussions or control your partner. It's a time to calm down so you won't do or say something you'll regret later.
4) During the 1 hour, calm your body by taking a walk and using relaxation techniques. This tells your body that you're safe; you don't need to be in fight-or-flight mode.

5) You can focus on reassuring, calming thoughts such as:
   - I can stay calm.
   - We can see this through together.
   - We'll come up with a solution.
6) During time out, you and your partner agree not to drink alcohol, use mind-altering substances, or drive. Also, no focusing on past resentments. Take the time to self-soothe and calm down.
7) In exactly 1 hour, return to your partner. Keeping your agreements builds trust and safety. Our partner gets the message that we want to discuss the issue further.
8) Ask your partner if they're ready to check in and continue the conversation. If neither partner is ready, take another hour or set a later time to continue the discussion.
9) A soft way to restart is for each person to say to the other: "I'm glad we're taking a break. I'm ready to meet again, are you? I want to hear your side of it again, then I'll share my side."
10) Use your skills with soft starts, "I" statements, and empathetic, active listening.

Time-Out Contract

When I realize that my (or my partner's) anger is rising, I will give a "T" signal for a time-out and leave at once. I will make a neutral parting statement such as, "I need some time to calm down." No parting shots!

I will return in one hour. I will take a walk to use up the anger energy and will not drink, use drugs, or drive while I am away. I will avoid focusing on past resentments.

When I return, I will start the conversation with, "I'm glad we're taking a break. I'm ready to meet again, are you? I want to hear your side of it again, then I'll share my side."

If my partner gives me a "T" signal and leaves, I will return the sign and let my partner go without hassle, no matter what's going on. I will not drink or use drugs while my partner is away and will avoid focusing on resentments. When my partner returns, I will start the conversation with, "I'm glad we're taking a break. I'm ready to meet again, are you?"

Name _____ Date _____

Name _____ Date _____

Rules for Disagreeing

It's important for you and your partner to agree on what is and is not acceptable behavior during a disagreement.

Complete the following questions alone first, and then go over your answers with your partner.

1) Do you feel good about the way you handle disagreements with your partner? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2) Are you ready and willing to make changes in how you disagree? ☐ Yes ☐ No

3) If there's one thing I could change about the way we disagree as a couple, it would be:

_____

_____

For the next 2 questions, consider possible behaviors that include the following:

- Physical behaviors; verbal/vocal responses; things that can/cannot be said; disagreeing in front of the children; acceptable and unacceptable ways to end a disagreement.

Remember: It is **NEVER OK** to threaten or use violence with each other. This is defined as when one or both routinely or deliberately uses verbal or physical attacks or threats to attack in order to control or manipulate the other. If your relationship includes this level of harmful behavior, or if you are confused or unsure about whether or not your relationship includes this kind of behavior, seek outside help. Contact your doctor or the Department of Psychology for resources to help.

4) I think it is OK for us to do any of the following in a disagreement with each other: _____

_____

_____

_____

5) I think it is *not* OK for us to do any of the following during a disagreement: _____

_____

_____

_____

Unfair Fighting Methods

Win/lose, right/wrong
Fighting for victory rather than a solution; deciding that only one of you can "win" or be "right," and that you will/must get the upper hand.

Gunnysacking
Gathering a long list of annoyances and issues that you haven't talked about, then exploding over one, often small, event.

Kitchen sink
Often results from gunnysacking—bringing up a week or month's-worth of pent-up issues in one argument or fight. Resolution becomes nearly impossible.

Below the belt
Using personal information about the other person's vulnerabilities against them during a disagreement over a separate issue.

Withdrawal
Leaving during an argument without promising to return, checking out emotionally, using the "silent treatment," or agreeing only as a way to shut down your partner ("Whatever you say, dear").

Indirectness
Fighting about everything except the real issue. Can include tears, yelling, coercing, or forgetting in order to avoid the central difficulty.

Name-calling
Put downs, blaming, or insulting the other person is NOT allowed.

Fighting Methods That Are NEVER OK

Pushing physical boundaries/physical contact Using physical presence or nearness to threaten the other person: slapping, shoving, hitting, or otherwise physically abusing the other person. Physical violence is NEVER OK. This includes any threats, such as threatening suicide, threatening to hurt oneself, the other person, or someone the other person cares about.

Ground Rules for Managing Conflict

Think it out:

- Think ahead about the problem: "Is it worth making an issue of it?"
- Identify a possible specific, positive solution.

Set a time:

- Ask for a practical, mutually agreeable time to discuss the issue.
- Either partner can say, "This is not a good time." Whoever rejects a particular time takes the responsibility to suggest another time in the near future.

Approach with respect and gentleness:

- Come willing to listen.
- Let your body language express kindness, calm, and respect (or at least, being neutral).
- Try for respectful understanding of your partner's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Commit to resolution:

- One small issue at a time.
- Small issues first.
- Stick to the issue instead of attacking the person.

Listen!

- Give your partner a full turn to speak.
- Check out what you hear and observe.
- Restate or validate what you hear.
- Resist the temptation to ESCALATE or withdraw.
- If you're too tempted, call a time-out.

Express yourself:

- Start gently, kindly.
- Say what you observe.
- Say what you feel and think.
- Say what you want or need in positive, specific terms.
- Say what's in it for your partner, if they agree to cooperate.

Home Practice

See Session 1 for instructions on these exercises:

- Sticky Note Exercise (Seeing Our Partner in a Positive Light)
- Fun Night (Taking Time)
- Reuniting at the End of the Day (Taking Time)

Stress Management

- Remember: "Breathe!"
- Practice the Relaxation Response by doing any stress management techniques.

Anger Management

- Read pages on Managing Anger and Understanding Anger.
- Use the Time-Out Contract, if needed.
- Follow the Rules for Disagreeing that you and your partner have made.
- Review Unfair Fighting Methods and Ground Rules for Managing Conflict.

Session 4: Conflict Management and Planning for the Future

Couples Exercise: Teaming Up Against a Problem

Step One

Each of you will identify a current problem you're having with your partner. Write your problem here:

_____

_____

Step Two

Try to identify the issue at the root of the problem without focusing on yourpartner (for example: not enough time, money, differences in child-rearing, work demands, etc.).

_____

_____

Step Three

Now that you've identified the issue, complete this sentence:

"Honey, you're not the problem, and I'm not the problem, _____ is the problem."

Step Four

You'll share this with your partner. Choose who will go first. Using positive body language say:

"Honey, you're not the problem, and I'm not the problem, _____ is the problem."

Step Five

Repeat the sentence one more time to your partner.

Step Six

Now the second partner becomes the Speaker and you are the Listener. Repeat the exercise.

The Problem-Solving Method

All couples have problems, even happy couples. Learning a method that considers both partners' needs can resolve many relationship problems. However, some problems cannot be solved. Partners will never agree on some issues. Yet couples can find a way to stay together and grow closer in spite of these differences.

The problem-solving method we suggest here has proven to help many couples solve the problems they can, and manage the ones they can't. This method has 6 steps.

Problem-Solving Worksheet
Step 1: Describe the problem. Be specific. Describe the last time it happened.
Step 2: Identify needs and feelings.
Step 3: Explore possible solutions. Brainstorm. No censoring. Silly or outlandish ideas welcome too!
Step 4: Select a solution. Eliminate any solution that isn't agreeable to both partners.
Step 5: Agree on an action plan. What will be done, who will do it, and when it will be done.
Step 6: Follow up. Set a time to review how the solution is working.

Reflecting on Your Experience

If the problem-solving process didn't work out satisfactorily this time, discuss these questions:

1) At what point did the process break down or get bogged down?

2) What reasons might you have for sticking with old familiar conflict patterns?

3) What reasons might you have for changing your process?

4) What would you be willing to do differently next time?

Couples Research Form

This questionnaire is another way to talk about difficult issues neutrally and calmly. It's useful for issues that a couple can't discuss without becoming angry.

Each partner interviews the other. On the first page, the interviewing partner jots down key points. (It isn't necessary to record the partner's comments word for word.)

The second page lists questions for the interviewer to ask to better understand their partner's viewpoint. For example, under Needs the interviewing partner would say, "What would make you feel better?" "What would you want to change?" etc. and writes down the main points.

When the first partner is finished speaking, the roles are reversed so that the second partner is the interviewer. This activity deepens each partner's understanding of the other's needs, feelings, fears, etc. This usually builds empathy as partners come to see each other as a person with real fears, needs, and feelings, rather than an enemy or adversary.

After interviewing each other and completing the form, couples usually have a clearer understanding of the needs and desires of their partner. This is usually helpful for problem-solving or learning to live with differences of opinions and beliefs.

This process will take some time. Set aside at least 1 hour to complete the interview. If you're not able to finish both interviews in the hour, set a specific time to come back together and finish the interview. If intense feelings or emotional responses arise during the interviews, give each other permission to take a break. During this time it can be helpful to do some breathing or grounding exercises.

Issue/Conflict

Needs (what my partner needs or wants):

Fears (what my partner is afraid might happen):

Other Emotional Pain (other feelings that affect my partner):

History (my partner's experiences from the past, other relationships, or childhood that relate to this issue):

Assumptions (my partner's beliefs about the issue, about what will happen in the future, about my motives, intentions, and feelings for the issue):

Perceived Choices (what options my partner believes they have regarding this issue):

Frame of Mind (what my partner is thinking during the conflict):

Physiological State (what my partner feels physically during the conflict):

Questions to Ask

Here are sample questions for each section of the Couples Research Form.

Needs

- What would make you feel better?
- What specifically would you want to change?
- If things could be exactly the way you want them, how would that be?
- What do you need to make this work for you?
- What's the most important thing you need changed?

Fears

- What are you afraid will happen if this situation continues?
- When we're in the middle of the conflict, what are you most afraid will happen?
- What scares you about this issue?
- What's your biggest nightmare of what's going to happen (to you, me, us) when this issue comes up?
- Has anything happened before that you're afraid will happen again regarding this issue?

Other Emotional Pain

- Do you have other feelings that come up in connection to this issue?
- Do you feel hurt, sad, guilty, overwhelmed, ashamed, humiliated, or betrayed?
- What's the most difficult feeling that comes up around this issue?
- What's the feeling that's hardest to talk about that gets triggered by this issue?

History

- Has anything ever happened to you in the past—either between us or even when you were growing up—that affects you regarding this issue?
- Are there things you've been through in the past that might influence how you feel or react?
- Have you been through anything before that feels like this—with me, in another relationship, or with your family?

Assumptions

- What do you believe to be true about this issue?
- What's your point of view? How do you see this?
- What do you think is going to happen in the future about this issue?
- Do you think we're headed for trouble? What kind?
- How do you see me in this issue?
- Do you have ideas about my motives, feelings, intentions, or attitude toward you?

Perceived Choices

- What choices do you think you have in this situation?
- What options do you think are open? Which ones seem impossible? Which seem too risky?

Frame of Mind

- When we're in the middle of the conflict, what are you thinking?
- What thoughts are strongest in your mind when this issue comes up?
- If I could read your mind when we're struggling with _____ what would I see?
- Is there a key thought or idea that usually comes up when this issue is triggered?

Physiological State

- What are you feeling physically when we're in the middle of this conflict? How strong is that feeling on a scale of 1 to 5?

  1 – Very mild

  2 – Mild

  3 – Moderate

  4 – Strong

  5 – Very strong
- Do you have sensations in your body when we're in the middle of this issue? Do they bother you?

Relationship Vision

Just as companies have vision statements, relationships can benefit from having one, too. A vision statement summarizes the ideals an organization wants to meet. Vision statements are usually posted to help remind employees to practice these ideals.

Each partner should write a relationship vision alone. Next, compare and explain your list with your partner. You may want to combine your lists to come up with *Our Combined Relationship Vision*.

Creating Our Relationship Vision

- Take time to think about what you want your relationship to be.
- Make a series of statements that tell about your vision.
- Write them in the present tense, as if they're already happening.

Benefit: *Getting a clear focus on positive goals for your relationship.*

Examples:

- We are loving, supportive parents.
- We make a contribution to our community.
- We are fair with each other.
- We find closeness and fulfillment in our lovemaking.
- We practice give-and-take.
- We take time to be with each other and to build our relationship.

Our Combined Relationship Vision

- Compare your "Relationship Vision" statements with your partner's.
- Write a combined list, using all the statements you both like from both lists.
- Keep this Combined Relationship Vision where you can review it regularly.
- From time to time, you may want to add to it.

Relationship Maintenance Plan

Each partner answers the following questions:

From what we've learned in class, I plan to practice these 3 most important skills to support our relationship:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I believe that to sustain the progress we've started in this class, we'll have to deal with these obstacles over the next 6 months:

_____

_____

_____

_____

My suggestions for dealing with these obstacles are:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Ongoing Practice

Sticky Notes (Seeing Our Partner in a Positive Light)

Fun Night (Taking Time)

Reuniting at the End of the Day (Taking Time)

Active Listening and Soft Starts

Stress and Anger Management

Problem-Solving Methods

Appendix: Resources

This appendix provides resources mentioned throughout the class.

Health Education Department Classes

All classes listed are a covered benefit provided at no cost to members (except Anger Management, which may have a fee).

Pathways to Emotional Wellness. Learn how thoughts and emotions can affect your physical wellness. We'll help you identify your sources of stress and learn simple techniques to help you relax, deal with anxiety, and recognize the signs and symptoms of depression. You'll also get an overview of other available Kaiser Permanente (KP) resources, so you can choose what's right for you.

Understanding Anxiety. In this series, you'll learn to identify what triggers anxiety for you as well as ways to manage your symptoms. We'll help you explore your thoughts and learn to approach instead of avoid what you fear. You'll also learn techniques to relax, reduce your response to triggers, and approach your anxiety with mindfulness.

Managing Your Stress. Emotions, thoughts, and behaviors can affect your health. Learn to recognize the sources of stress in your life, manage stress-related symptoms and illnesses, develop healthy lifestyle habits, and take better care of yourself.

Managing Depression. Depression is real, common, and treatable. You'll learn about depression and how to manage your symptoms. We'll help you challenge negative thoughts and enjoy life more. We'll also teach you relaxation and mindfulness techniques.

Improving Sleep. Want to fall asleep quicker, sleep more soundly, and wake up feeling more refreshed? Learn how nighttime habits and your thinking patterns affect sleep, and how to change them. This class doesn't address medical conditions that interfere with sleep.

Anger Management. This class is designed to increase your awareness and understanding of anger, as well as the impact it has in your life and relationships. You'll learn skills to help manage anger, cope with conflict, and communicate more effectively. **This is *not* a covered benefit. There may be a fee for this class.**

For more information or to register for these programs online, please call your local Health Education Department. Phone numbers can be found on **kpdoc.org/contacthealtheducation**.

Wellness Coaching (phone)
Would you like to achieve a healthy weight, quit tobacco, lower your stress, move more, eat healthier, or sleep better? Talk with a specially trained wellness coach to build your motivation and take action. Together, you'll create a customized plan for change. Set up sessions with your coach at times that work for you: Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Coaching is available to KP members at no cost. Call 1-866-251-4514 or book online at **kp.org/mydoctor/wellnesscoaching**.

Mental Health
Mental health support is available. You don't need a referral from your doctor. For more information or to make an appointment, please contact your local Mental Health Department. Phone numbers can be found on **kpdoc.org/mentalhealth**.

You can also contact the KP Appointment and Advice Call Center at 1-866-454-8855.

Recommended Readings

Session 1: Building Blocks for Effective Connecting: Taking Time and Caring Behaviors

- *The Five Love Languages,* by Gary Chapman

Session 2: Active, Empathetic Listening and Expressing Ourselves

- *7 Principles for Making Marriage Work,* by John Gottman

Session 3: Managing Stress and Anger

- *Anger Control Book,* by Matthew McKay
- *Full Catastrophe Living,* by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Session 4: Conflict Management and Planning for the Future

- *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage,* by John Gottman

Kaiser Permanente Online Resources

- Calm and Self-Care apps: **kp.org/selfcareapps**
- Mindfulness and Meditation: **kp.org/selfcare**
- Relaxation Podcasts: **kp.org/listen**
- Relaxation Exercises: **kpdoc.org/deepbreathing**
- My Doctor Online Sleep Resources: **kpdoc.org/sleep**
- Healthy Sleep Habits Podcast: **kpdoc.org/xETj**

Additional Resources

211: Call 211 or visit the website for help finding essential community resources.

Disaster Distress Helpline: Call 1-800-985-5990, or text TalkWithUs to 66746

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 (24-hour support)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call 1-800-273-8255

National Domestic Violence Hotline: Call 1-800-799-7233 and TTY 1-800-787-3224
Your relationship affects your health. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available in over 170 languages by calling or via online chat at thehotline.org. These hotlines can connect you to local resources and provide support.

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This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only. Some photos may include models and not actual patients.

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