

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, you will learn about the importance of communication between sexual partners and potential barriers to effective communication and how to overcome these barriers. Methods for conducting research on sexual communication, differences in communication styles between men and women and mixed-sex and same-sex couples are also discussed.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you will

- learn about different ways in which intimate partners communicate with each other, particularly about sex and sexuality;
- consider differences in the ways women and men communicate;
- discover common approaches to the study of sexual communication; and
- encounter valuable advice on what to do—and what not to do—in order to communicate effectively with a sexual partner.

List of Key Terms

Behavioural confirmation A process whereby someone's expectations about an upcoming event influence his or her behaviour and thus cause the event to unfold in a way that is consistent with his or her expectations. (p. 327)

Blind coders Coders who are not familiar with the specific hypotheses of the study. (p. 316)

Contempt A negative communication behaviour that entails putting down and/or expressing disrespect toward one's partner. (p. 314)

Couples' communication An ongoing exchange between two partners that unfolds over time and consists of verbal, behavioural, and affective exchanges. (p. 314)

Criticism A negative communication behaviour that entails attacking a partner's character or personality rather than focusing specifically on the behaviour that is upsetting. (p. 314)

Defensiveness A negative communication behaviour in which someone protects himself or herself from a perceived verbal assault by denying responsibility, making excuses, or counter-complaining. (p. 314)

Demand-withdraw A communication pattern in which one partner puts pressure on the other (e.g., by nagging or criticizing) and the other partner does not engage or is defensive. (p. 315)

Impression management A form of socially desirable responding in which someone deliberately responds in a way that makes him or her look good to others. (p. 322)

Interrater reliability The extent to which two independent observers obtain the same results when using the same coding system. (p. 316)

Negative reciprocity A communication pattern in which each partner tends to respond to the other with negative comments or behaviours, thereby escalating the conflict. (p. 315)

Non-verbal communication All communication behaviours that are not words, including but not limited to body posture, voice qualities, facial expressions, and gestures. (p. 314)

Orgasmic disorder Significant difficulty or inability to experience orgasm even with adequate sexual stimulation. (p. 321)

Perceptual confirmation A process whereby someone interprets an event in a way that is consistent with his or her expectations. (p. 327)

Self-deceptive enhancement A form of socially desirable responding in which someone inadvertently responds in a way that makes him or her look good to others because he or she truly perceives himself or herself more positively than is accurate. (p. 322)

Sexual communication The processes by which intimate partners share their sexual likes and dislikes with each other and negotiate sexuality in their relationship. (p. 313)

Socially desirable responding The tendency to modify one's responses to a questionnaire or interview in order to make oneself appear in a favourable light. (p. 322)

Stonewalling A negative communication behaviour that entails refusing to respond and resisting influence by not engaging in the discussion at hand. (p. 314)

Online Resources

- The Gottman Institute: The Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse
<http://www.gottmanblog.com/2013/04/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism.html>
- Evidence that men and women are more similar than Mars/Venus books would have you think
<http://www.purdue.edu/uns/html4ever/2004/040217.MacGeorge.sexroles.html>
- Tips for conflict resolution
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq8_conflict_resolution.htm
- Planned Parenthood: Talking to kids about sex and sexuality
<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-to-kids-about-sex-and-sexuality>
- University of California: sexual communication
<https://shcs.ucdavis.edu/topics/sexual-communication>

Review Questions

For answers, see below.

1. In what ways is communication between partners in a distressed relationship different than communication between partners in a healthy relationship?
2. To what extent does non-verbal communication contribute to couples' communication?
3. Can researchers rely on data collected from watching couples interact in a laboratory? Why or why not?
4. What is a social status explanation for the demand-withdraw interaction pattern observed in women and men in Western society?
5. What are some benefits and costs of conducting lab research on the communication patterns of real couples?
6. When a couple is discussing a sexual issue, what ONE factor seems to be most important in determining whether the conversation provides a solution or worsens the problem?

Review Questions: Answers

1. Partners in a distressed relationship often communicate using one or more of the four horsemen of the relationship apocalypse: criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness. (p. 314)
2. Non-verbal communication plays a very important role in communication. Perhaps most importantly, researchers have found that when verbal and non-verbal signals don't match, the recipient is more likely to respond based on the non-verbal message than the verbal one. Thus tone of voice or posture may be more influential than words. Couples who are trying to work out problems should be aware that they must send the correct non-verbal message as well as the correct verbal one. (pp. 314-315)
3. Research seems to indicate that couples' communication patterns in the lab reflect what they do in real life. Two observations that support this argument include the fact that couples report that their lab interactions are similar to their private interaction and that researchers have been able to reliably detect participants who were instructed to "fake being nice" or "fake being angry" in single-blind studies. (p. 316)
4. In Western society, women are often seen as demanders while men withdraw. One explanation is a social status based explanation, which states that men in western society are happy with their role in the marriage (with less responsibility) and women are less happy (with more responsibility) and more demanding. This theory is supported by findings that the demand-withdraw pattern is less pronounced in societies where the roles of men and women are more similar. (p. 318)
5. Some benefits include providing help to the couple and to future couples who might have sexual communication issues. Some costs may be that couples are distressed by having to discuss their problems and are embarrassed about talking about issues in front of people they don't know and are concerned about privacy. (pp. 322-323)
6. Listening skills of both partners seem to be extremely influential in determining whether a conversation is a success. (p. 327)