

Exercise: Give Me Just One Word

Here's another exercise designed for two people who are having conflict and who want to improve their relationship. It's based on a technique used by sports psychologists to help athletes perform better under pressure. The idea is that people often find it hard to remember complex instructions in the heat of competition. So their coaches give them just one word that summarizes the most important concept they need to remember in order to win. Then, just before the competition, the athletes focus on that word. If they get confused, agitated, or "flooded" during the game or match, the coach can repeat the word, helping them to get back on track. A boxing coach, for example, can tell the boxer, "Dance!" during the short break between rounds. A soccer coach might tell his player, "Aggress!" And this one word helps him to get his drive and concentration back again.

All of this can be applied as well to people who want to improve their relationships. When you're in conflict with somebody and you become flooded with fear or anger, all your best intentions can go out the window. But if you can remember just one word that might help you to focus on what the other person needs during these conflicts, you'll have a better chance of finding common ground and connecting. Here's what each of you should do.

1. Read the list of words that follows. As you look at each one, think about what you usually feel you need from this other person during a typical conflict.
2. Circle the five words that best describe your needs.
3. Now share your list of five words with each other. Tell the other person what each word on your list means *to you*, and how you would like to see him or her display this behavior or characteristic during your conflicts.
4. Listen carefully as the other person describes the words on his or her list. Avoid getting into a debate about the correct meaning of a particular word. This is not a vocabulary lesson. Your goal is to try to understand what that word means to that person, and how you might personify it. Ask questions about any points that seem unclear.
5. Keep talking until you can determine together how each of you can best display the characteristics on each other's lists.

6. Write all the words down and keep them in a place that's easily accessible to both of you.

7. The next time you get into a conflict with this person, remember the words that were on your list. Say the one that best describes what you need from this person in that moment. Think of yourself as an encouraging coach who only wants the best for both of you.

8. When you hear your partner offer his or her word, stop and remember what he or she needs in the moment. Think of this person as an encouraging coach who only wants the best for both of you.

9. Try to use this exercise consistently over a period of several weeks. The more you use it, the better you'll learn it, and the more effective it will become.

Words to Use

Empathize	Expand	Accept
Respect	Endure	Watch
Nurture	Accept me	Cooperate
Court me	Tenderness	Stand up for me
Dignity	Teamwork	Honesty
Start over	Cherish	Hold me
Listen	Caress	Talk
Love	Be silly	Conscience
Fun	End the chaos	Connect
Company	Emote	Compromise
Validate	Be strong	Feel
Touch	Don't whine	Feedback
Affection	Let it in	Faith
Forgive	Include me	Explain
Help	Don't go	Experiment
Honor me	Take charge	Abandon
Notice	Know yourself	I was wrong
We	Kiss me	You may be right
Boundaries	Laugh	I see your point
Symbiotic	Defend me	Humor
Believe	Stop	Heal
Soften	Stay	Grow
Begin again	Create	Give in
Surprise	Courage	Stand by me
Assert	Cope	Spontaneity
Ask questions	Kindness	Stand up
Summarize	Follow through	Sorry
Say yes	Breathe	Energy
Strength	Accept influence	Compassion

Commitment

Us

Yield

Hug me

Yes

Taste

Soothe

Solidarity

Unity

Understand

Trust

Treasure

Think

Optimism

Soften

Sense

Sensation

Gentleness

See my point

See

Say maybe

Romance

Restore

Rest

Careful

Responsibility

Relax

Reason

Protect

Principles

Calm down

Pleasure

Peace

Repair

Patience

Open