

Playful Communication in Relationships

Playful communication is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships exciting, fresh, and vital. Laughter and play enrich your interactions and give your relationships that extra zing that keeps them interesting, light, and enjoyable. This shared pleasure creates a sense of intimacy and connection—qualities that define solid, lasting relationships.

People are attracted to happy, funny individuals. Laughter draws others to you and keeps them by your side. When you laugh with one another, a positive bond is created. This bond acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements, and disappointment. And laughter really is contagious—just hearing laughter primes your brain to smile and join in on the fun.

Playful communication in relationships tip #1: Make sure both partners are in on the joke

Humor and playfulness can strengthen relationships—but only when both people are in on the joke. It's important to be sensitive to the other person. If your partner, friend, or colleague isn't likely to appreciate the joke, don't say or do it, even if it's "all in good fun." When playfulness is one-sided rather than mutual, it undermines trust and goodwill and damages the relationship. Consider the following example:

Michelle's feet are always cold when she gets into bed, but she has what she thinks is a playful solution. She heats up her icy feet by placing them on her husband Kevin's warm body. However, this isn't a game he enjoys. Kevin has repeatedly told Michelle that he doesn't appreciate being used as a foot warmer, but she just laughs at his complaints. Lately, Kevin has taken to sleeping at the far edge of the bed, a solution that distances them as a couple.

Playful communication in relationships should be equally fun and enjoyable for both people. If your friend or partner doesn't think your joking or teasing is funny—it's not. So before you start playing around, take a moment to consider your motives, as well as your partner or friend's state of mind and sense of humor.

Playful communication in relationships tip #2: Use humor to defuse conflict

When conflict and disagreement throw a wrench in your relationships, humor and playfulness can help lighten things up and restore a sense of connection.

Used skillfully and respectfully, playful humor can turn conflict into an opportunity for shared fun and intimacy. It allows you to get your point across without getting the other person's defenses up or hurting their feelings. For example:

Lori's husband comes home sweaty and dirty from his job. This turns her off, and she can't imagine being intimate with him under these circumstances. But when she says he should take a bath, he gets angry and accuses her of not appreciating what he does for a living. So instead, Lori turns on the water, begins playfully peeling off his clothes, and joins him in the tub.

Alex is retired, but he still goes up on the roof to clean the gutters. His wife, Angie, has told him numerous times that it scares her when he gets up there on the ladder. Today, instead of her usual complaints, she yells up to him, "You know, it's husbands like you who turn wives into nags." Alex laughs and comes down from the roof.

**Playful communication in relationships tip #3:
Don't use humor to cover up other emotions**

Humor and shared playfulness help you stay resilient in the face of life's challenges. But there are times when humor is not healthy—when it is used as a cover for avoiding, rather than coping with, painful emotions. Laughter can be a disguise for feelings of hurt, fear, anger, and disappointment that you don't want to feel or don't know how to express.

You can be funny about the truth—but covering up the truth isn't funny. When you use humor and playfulness as a cover for other emotions, you create confusion and mistrust in your relationships. The following are examples of misplaced humor:

Mike is a constant jokester. Nothing ever seems to get him down and he never takes anything seriously. No matter what happens to him or to anyone else, he makes a joke out of the situation. In reality, Mike is scared to death of dark feelings, conflict, and intimacy. He uses humor to avoid uncomfortable feelings and to keep other people at arm's length.

Sharon is often jealous and possessive with her boyfriend Kevin. But she has never learned to openly discuss her insecurities and fears. Instead, she uses what she thinks is humor to express her feelings. However, her "jokes" usually having a biting, almost hostile edge and do not seem at all funny to Kevin, who responds with coldness and withdrawal.

Improving your playful communication skills

It's never too late to develop and embrace your playful, humorous side. Self-consciousness and concern for how you look and sound to others is probably a big factor that's limiting your playfulness. But as a baby, you were naturally playful; you didn't worry about the reactions of other people.

You can reclaim your inborn playfulness by setting aside regular, quality playtime. The more you joke, play, and laugh—the easier it becomes.

Another excellent way to learn playfulness is to practice with “experts”

Play with animals. Puppies, kittens, and other animals—both young and old—are eager playmates and always ready to frolic. Make play dates with friends' pets, stop to play with a friendly animal in your neighborhood, or consider getting a pet of your own.

Play with babies and young children. The real authorities in human play are children, especially young children. Playing with children who know and trust you is a wonderful way to learn from the experts.

As humor and play become an integrated part of your life, you should find new opportunities for play daily.

Adapted from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq7_playful_communication.htm

