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## How to Fix a Communication Breakdown

By Daniel L. Shapiro

Daniel L. Shapiro, PhD, is a renowned negotiation expert who works to solve international conflicts using the psychology of emotions. Your problems may not threaten world peace, but he has some ideas for you, too.

**Help! After a fight, you and your spouse are no longer speaking.** First, ask yourself: "What's my purpose here? To feel empowered? To get respect? To let "that moron" know I'm angry?" Then ask, "Is the silent treatment really going to get me there?" Once you're ready to talk, be respectful; instead of "I'm ready, let's talk," try "I'd like to understand you better; let me know when you're ready to talk." The best advice, though, is to do what nations do—establish rules of engagement in advance. Over a glass of wine, take 20 minutes to set some parameters: What does a good fight look like? How can you work to understand, not defend? Just keep in mind that you're supposed to be collaborating. No point in fighting about how to fight.

**Help! A colleague leaves you off an important e-mail at work. Then your boss wants an update on a project you never heard of. How do you get in the loop?** People often worry about things happening behind their back at work. But instead of giving in to paranoia, start a conversation about roles. Ask your boss, "What are my responsibilities? What decisions should I be involved in? How do I ensure that I get the information I need to do what I'm expected to?" These are questions you can ask in a neutral and safe way. Also ask, "Is there any advice you can give that would prevent this from happening again?" If anyone *is* out to sabotage you, this will make clear that you're not willing to go along with that dynamic.

**Help! Your friend loves complaining to you but never asks how *you're* doing. How do you stop being the designated Dumpster?** Chances are, you pick up the phone and—boom!—she talks, you listen. So at the beginning of your next chat, establish a new structure. Say, "Hey, it's great to hear from you. I have about 30 minutes, and there's a lot I'd like to catch you up on. Maybe we can each take 15 minutes to tell each other what's going on." You can also raise the issue directly: "I value our relationship, and I want to be there to listen. I just sometimes feel that it's harder for me to share with you. Do you have suggestions about how to do that?" This way, you're not accusing; you're inviting help.

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