RELATIONSHIP
COURSE
*love with Passion*
by Rabbi Lasry

A FREE GUIDE FROM THE RELATIONSHIP COURSE

# 7 Communication Mistakes That Hurt Your Marriage

And what to do instead, from the Torah and from years of sitting with couples.



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# Every couple fights. Not every couple grows closer from it.

"I get along great with my friends and my business partners. It's only with my wife that it drives me crazy. Why?" A successful businessman once asked me this.

A man and a woman are so different that the most natural thing in the world is to disagree. **Disagreement is okay.** What's toxic is a fight that turns two people who love each other into enemies.

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"אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה, זָכוּ – שְׁכִינָה בֵּינֵיהֶן; לֹא זָכוּ – אֵשׁ אוֹכַלְתָּן"

"A man and a woman: if they are worthy, the Divine Presence rests between them; if they are not worthy, fire consumes them."

SOTAH 17A

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The Hebrew word for man, **ish**, has the letter yud. The word for woman, **isha**, has the letter heh. Together they spell a Name of Hashem. Take those letters out, and what's left in both words is **esh**, fire. The way we speak to each other decides which one lives in our home.

These seven mistakes are the ones I see again and again. You will probably recognize yourself in some of them. That's good news: **awareness is the first step.**

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1. Fighting about the topic, not the need
2. Believing the story in your head
3. Reacting before you pause
4. Opening the conversation under fire
5. Answering before you understand
6. Attacking the person, not the problem
7. Letting the account run empty

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MISTAKE ONE

# Fighting about the topic, not the need

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
> "You spend on yourself, but never on me."

The credit card is declined. There's no money for summer camp. She says, "You spend on yourself, but not on me." He's stressed and feels bad about himself, so he attacks back. Within a minute they're fighting about money, and the money was never the point.

> **The argument is almost never about what it seems to be about on the surface.**

## What's usually underneath

An unmet need: love, respect, security, appreciation, belonging. Unspoken expectations ("my spouse should know what I want"). Pressure from work, money, children and fatigue that comes home and turns into a fight inside.

## Instead

Ask yourself, and then ask your spouse: **"What do I really need right now?"** Every complaint is a cry from a need that wasn't met. When you answer the need, the topic often solves itself.

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TRY THIS WEEK

After the next small argument, write one sentence: "The topic was ___. What I really needed was ___."

# 2

MISTAKE TWO

# Believing the story in your head

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
> "He didn't call. He obviously doesn't care about me."

Most fights are not about what was said. They are about the meaning each of you gives it. This is how a fight is born:

1. **Event:** something happened.
2. **Interpretation:** the meaning we give it, from our thoughts, our past and our feelings.
3. **Emotion:** the interpretation stirs up a feeling.
4. **Reaction:** the feeling drives our behavior.
5. **Result:** distance, pain and a fight.

He came home late and didn't send a message. She tells herself, "He doesn't care. I'm not important." He tells himself, "Whatever I do, it's never enough." They're both wrong. What creates the pain is the stories they tell themselves.

> **There is a truth that is your truth, but it is not the absolute truth.**

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TRY THIS WEEK

Before you react, stop and ask: **"What's the real story?"** Then name one other way to read what happened.

3

MISTAKE THREE

# Reacting before you pause

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
>
> Raised voices, a slammed door, or a cold silence that lasts two days.

When the brain senses a threat, it switches into survival mode, and we react before we think. People who hear a recording of themselves in the middle of a fight sometimes ask, "Who is that? I can't believe I said that."

> **The brain wasn't designed to make us succeed. It was designed to make us survive.**

The brain has three fast answers: **fight** (hit back), **flight** (leave, avoid, shut the other person out) and **freeze** (close up and feel nothing). There is a fourth way, slower and stronger: calm the threat through closeness and "I'm here."

## Instead: the five-second pause

Before you answer, ask yourself: **"Will what I'm about to say bring us closer, or will it only prove that I'm right?"** If you're losing control, say: "I'm flooded. I need twenty minutes to calm down, and I promise we'll continue." Then come back.

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TRY THIS WEEK

Agree together on a short phrase that means "pause, I'll be back." Use it once.

# 4

MISTAKE FOUR

# Opening the conversation under fire

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
> "We need to talk." Said the moment he walks in the door.

How a conversation starts usually decides how it ends. When you open with criticism, when your spouse is tired, or the second they come home, the walls go up before you've said what you need.

> **A man doesn't open up under fire. He opens up under respect. And when she feels safe, she blossoms.**

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"אַל תּוֹכַח לֵץ פֶּן יִשְׂנָאֶךָּ, הוֹכַח לְחָכָם וְיֶאֱהָבֶךָּ"

"Do not rebuke a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise person, and he will love you."

PROVERBS 9:8

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## Instead: open gently

"There's something on my heart I'd like to share. I'm looking for connection, not a fight. When is a good time to sit quietly together?" And begin with appreciation: "I know how hard you try, and I appreciate it."

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TRY THIS WEEK

Before your next hard conversation, ask for a time, and open with one true sentence of appreciation.

5

MISTAKE FIVE

# Answering before you understand

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
> "That's not what happened." Said before your spouse has finished the sentence.

Most of us listen in order to answer. We prepare our defense while the other person is still speaking, and they feel it. So they say it again, louder.

### Instead: listen, then mirror, validate and empathize

Stay quiet, even for fifteen minutes, and let your spouse let it all out. Then:

1. **Mirroring:** "If I understood correctly, you feel that... Did I get that right? Is there anything else?"
2. **Validation:** "What you're saying makes sense."
3. **Empathy:** "I can imagine how much pain, fear or loneliness is in this."

Only after that do you apologize or explain yourself. It seems technical, but it works.

> **First understand, then explain.**

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TRY THIS WEEK

Five minutes each: one shares, the other only listens, then mirrors back. Then switch. Only if you both want to.

6

MISTAKE SIX

# Attacking the person, not the problem

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
> "You always do this. You're so selfish. Your mother was the same."

The question in every disagreement is whether we're against the problem, or against each other.

> **Don't win the argument. Win against the problem.**

### The golden rule: protect each other's dignity

- Talk about behavior, not personality: "When that happened, I felt alone," instead of "You're selfish."
- No absolute words like "always" and "never."
- Don't open the "history file." The fight is about now.
- Don't fight when you're hungry, angry, lonely or tired.
- Don't fight in front of the children, and don't bring in friends, parents or social media.
- Don't threaten divorce, even when you don't mean it.

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TRY THIS WEEK

Catch one "always" or "never" before it leaves your mouth, and replace it with "when ___ happened, I felt ___."

7

MISTAKE SEVEN

# Letting the account run empty

> WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
>
> A missed phone call that suddenly turns into a crisis.

Think of an **emotional bank account**. A kind word, quality time, listening, appreciation and touch are deposits. Criticism, ignoring, mockery and broken promises are withdrawals.

When the account is full, an unanswered phone call doesn't blow up the house. When it's empty, every little thing becomes a crisis. Unhandled friction moves through stages: **resistance** (something bothers you and you don't say it), **resentment** ("I'm always the only one giving"), **rejection** (two partners sharing a house), and in the end, **quiet surrender**.

> **Healthy couples don't fight less. They understand what's behind the fight, and they solve it together.**

## Instead

Make small deposits every day, on purpose. Don't go to sleep angry, and end every fight with something good.

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TRY THIS WEEK

One deposit a day for seven days: a thank-you, ten minutes without phones, a message in the middle of the day.

# Awareness is the first step. Love is the cure.



Peace between husband and wife brings peace to the home, and peace in the home brings peace to the world. If even one of these seven mistakes felt familiar, you already have somewhere to start.

Over the next few days I'll send you a few short emails with one practical tool each. Read them together if you can.

**Rabbi Yitzchak Lasry**

### Want to go deeper?

The Relationship Course walks you through ten modules, from the "why" of marriage to conflict, trust and intimacy, with a workbook and exercises for every lesson.

**Rabbilasry.com**

These tools are for ordinary disagreements, where both sides are willing to change. They are not for fear, violence or coercion. If you feel unsafe, or your relationship has completely disconnected, reach out to a rabbi, a counselor or a therapist.