

Which Conversation Did I Interrupt?

The thinking behind this checklist is in *Is Communication Really the Problem in Couples Counseling?* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which names eight purposes a conversation can serve and what is usually missing when each one fails. The attunement section draws on *How to Become a Better Communicator* and *Invalidating Communication*. Search “is communication really the problem” on the site.

When a partner says we do not listen, they usually mean a particular kind of conversation went wrong. The moves below are the common ways we interrupt one. Each is grouped by the purpose it damages most, with the capacity that grows in its place. Page two takes one conversation through it. Page three goes deeper on the one that fails most often, connection.

INTERRUPTS PLAY Correcting the detail	Wednesday, not Tuesday. Fact-checking the story, playing devil's advocate, turning a riff into a problem. The story was the point. Grows into: signal-noise discernment, playfulness.
INTERRUPTS CONNECTION Answering the plot instead of the feeling	Teaching, fixing, reframing, offering optimism or “at least” before the feeling has been received, minimizing, or exaggerating it past what they felt. Grows into: attunement, empathy, less-is-more reflection.
INTERRUPTS INFLUENCE Understanding without changing	We reflect the request warmly and our behavior continues. Or we defend why it cannot change before we have taken it in. Grows into: reciprocal influence, discipline, open-mindedness.
INTERRUPTS AGENCY Bulldozing or caretaking	Overriding a no that was clearly said, or managing their reaction instead of stating our own position. Grows into: informed boundaries, courage, respect for the no.
INTERRUPTS NEGOTIATION Treating a preference as a wrong	Debating Chinese against Italian as if one of us were mistaken. Grows into: dialectic maturity, perspective-taking.
INTERRUPTS STRATEGY Skiping the information	Proposing before looking, giving directions without checking they landed, half-attending. Grows into: curiosity, attentional flexibility.
INTERRUPTS SHARED MEANING Rushing the dream	Turning a question about what matters into logistics, or having no position of our own to bring. Grows into: self-awareness, values discernment.
INTERRUPTS REPAIR Counter-critiquing and contempt	Answering feedback with feedback of our own, sarcasm, blaming, denial, stonewalling, or becoming the one who needs comforting. These also cut connection. Grows into: capacity for repair, identity fluidity, staying regulated under intensity.

One conversation

Directions: take the exchange our partner was thinking of when they said it. We are looking for which purpose was interrupted and by what, not for who was right.

WHAT HAPPENED

What they brought, what I said back, how it ended. A few lines.

STEP ONE

What was the conversation for?

The purpose they started. Check one or two.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Play: they wanted us to enjoy it | ☐ Connection: they wanted to feel known |
| ☐ Influence: they wanted something to change | ☐ Agency: they were saying yes or no |
| ☐ Negotiation: we had to decide together | ☐ Strategy: we had something to get done |
| ☐ Shared meaning: what matters to us | ☐ Repair: they were hurt, or I was |

STEP TWO: WHAT I DID

Check every move I made, even the small ones. The purpose each one damages is on page one.

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|---|--|
| ☐ Corrected a detail that did not matter | ☐ Played devil's advocate |
| ☐ Fixed, taught, or offered a plan | ☐ Reframed before reflecting |
| ☐ Offered optimism or "at least" | ☐ Minimized it, or made it bigger than it was |
| ☐ Understood the request and changed nothing | ☐ Defended before taking it in |
| ☐ Overrode a no | ☐ Managed their reaction instead of stating my position |
| ☐ Treated their preference as a mistake | ☐ Proposed before looking, or did not check it landed |
| ☐ Turned what matters into logistics | ☐ Had no position of my own to bring |
| ☐ Answered feedback with feedback of my own | ☐ Sarcasm, blame, denial, or silence |

STEP THREE

Which purpose did I interrupt?

Compare the purpose they started with the moves I checked. Name the purpose I damaged, and the capacity from page one that would have served it.

THE PURPOSE I INTERRUPTED

THE CAPACITY TO GROW INSTEAD

WHAT MY PARTNER NEEDED FROM ME

In their terms, not mine. One sentence that would have served the purpose they started.

Attunement, in depth

Directions: most listening complaints are about connection. This page takes the same conversation through what attunement asks of us, and what a less-is-more response would have been.

WHAT ATTUNEMENT LOOKS LIKE

Check what I did. Leave blank what I skipped. There is no score.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Sustained eye contact | ☐ Matched their words against their face and body |
| ☐ Championed the emotional content over the facts | ☐ Noticed more than one feeling at once |
| ☐ Asked what they needed before offering anything | ☐ Said a word or two and checked, instead of a paragraph |
| ☐ Let the feeling complete before responding | ☐ Offered my own steadiness rather than my analysis |

THE STORY

What they said

The plot. The facts, the sequence, the logistics.

UNDERNEATH

What they felt

Often more than one thing at once: relieved and sad, angry and proud. The deeper attunement is naming the mix, not picking one.

THE NEED

What would let them feel held

Specific to this person. Words, room, a hand, a question, nothing at all. Their way of being comforted, not mine.

THE LESS-IS-MORE RESPONSE

A word or two and a check. "Humiliating. Is that close?" Write what I would say now.

MY GROWTH AREA

From everything above: the one capacity I would grow first, and what practicing it this week looks like with this person.

A reflection that is technically correct and emotionally absent lands as being handled. The length of the sentence is usually the problem.