



## **The Art and Science of Lovemaking**



# **Skills for Having A Great Date**

# THE GOTTMAN INSTITUTE Gott Sex?

## **You Need to Build a Strong Foundation of Good, Basic Listening Skills**

Your knack for drawing others out and expressing a genuine curiosity about their lives can be a real boon to establishing connection and satisfying relationships. Good listening skills can help you to feel easy in all sorts of social situations and to build the kind of rapport that leads to solid emotional bonds.

## **Focus on Being Interested, Not Interesting**

That's the counsel Dale Carnegie offered in his 1937 classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which is still a top seller more than six decades later. And after my many decades of observational research, I have to say that it's still some of the best advice available. Carnegie was right when he wrote: "You can make more friends in two months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."

While Carnegie's advice centered on friendship and salesmanship, my research shows that you can apply the same principle to build better relationships with your spouse, your siblings, your children, your boss—anybody who plays a significant role in your life. That's because everybody wants to feel valued and appreciated. And nothing fosters such good will as well as your ability to pay sincere attention to the details of another person's life.

## **Start by Asking Questions**

Don't ask the kind that can be answered with simple one-word responses. Instead, ask questions that allow people to explain their points of view and elaborate. Questions that begin with the words, "Why do you suppose," and, "How do you think," are good for this. Avoid questions that are too open-ended—questions like "What's new?" or "How's it going?" Too often, people give pat responses to such queries. Perhaps it's because they're not sure if you really want to know. But if you can ask the same type of question in a more tailored way, you're sure to get more meaty answers.

Examples:

*“So what’s your latest project (at school, in your department, around the house, etc.)?”*

*“How’s your summer going? Got any vacation plans?”*

While it’s good to ask specific questions, it’s usually not good for a relationship to pry or to manipulate people into telling more about themselves than they’re comfortable revealing. To find the right balance of disclosure, let the other person take the lead as you ask open-ended questions that are related to information that person has already revealed.

Say, for example, that a new acquaintance has alluded to using drugs while in college. If you wanted to pursue that line of conversation, you could say, *“Was there a lot of drug use where you went to school?”* Then, depending on his level of comfort, he could choose to speak from personal experience or to talk more generally. This would probably work better than a pointed probe like, *“Did you ever feel addicted to smoking pot?”* It might get to the point more quickly, but you’d risk losing the connection.

## **Ask Questions About People’s Goals and Visions of the Future**

Such queries can be a great way to connect. I’m reminded of the way some couples in our apartment lab used the view outside the window as a way to launch conversations about one another’s shared dreams and fantasies of the future.

*“Look at that boat,”* one husband said. *“If you could sail away to anywhere in the world, where would you go?”*

Another asked, *“If you had that kind of money, what would you spend it on? A boat, a cabin in the mountains, or what?”*

## **Look for Commonalities as Others Offer their Opinions, Experiences, and Interests**

People are attracted to those with whom they have things in common, so make it a point to let others know when you share similar views or backgrounds. At the same time, don’t try to make yourself the focus of conversation. Say enough to establish common ground and empathize, but always remember to share the floor.

When you want people to disclose information about themselves, it can help to reveal details about your own life first. Be sure to aim for balance, however. Sharing too much personal information too early can be harmful to relationships. Your conversation partner may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of what you’re sharing, or feel pressured to become too close too soon.

Be sparing also, when sharing past experiences with teenagers or children. Young people often have a hard time imagining that their elders

“ say  
enough  
to establish  
common  
ground  
and  
empathize,  
but  
always  
remember  
to share  
the floor ”

were ever so young. And it's especially hard for them to imagine that older people ever encountered challenges similar to the ones they're facing. Such lack of imagination is not their fault; it's just a normal part of being young. You can still let youngsters know that you understand what they're going through, however. The best way is to engage them in friendly conversations about their own experiences. Ask pertinent questions, reflect back what you're hearing, and empathize.

Say, for example, that you're visiting your 12-year-old niece who has just gotten braces:

You could say, *"I had braces when I was your age."*

To which she might reply, *"Oh."*

Then you might say, *"We didn't have those fancy colored brackets back then."*

To which she might reply, *"Oh."*

Or you could ask her questions about her own unique, current experience, resulting in a much more direct emotional connection. That conversation might sound like this:

*"How do your braces feel?"*

*"They're OK now. But the first night was really painful."*

*"I'll bet. Did you take something for it?"*

*"Yeah, some ibuprofen."*

*"And how did it feel to wear them to school for the first time?"*

*"I felt so weird!"*

*"I think I know what you mean—like self-conscious?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"Did any of your friends tease you?"*

*"My friends didn't, but there's this guy in my math class and he was like, 'Hey, Metal Mouth.' And I was like, 'Oh, my God!'"*

*"So you felt kind of embarrassed?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"But you're smiling when you tell me about it. Did you feel kind of glad that he noticed?"*

*"Yeah. I guess so. Because he's real funny and smart. And I didn't even think he knew my name."*

*"But now he can call you 'Metal Mouth.'"*

*"Yeah, cool, huh?"*

The difference in the two conversations is focus. The adult lets the pre-teen know that she's understood without taking the spotlight off the

girl's present situation. As a result, the girl feels like she has an engaged, sympathetic listener, so she continues revealing more about her life.

## **Tune in with All Your Attention**

Once you've encouraged somebody to talk, the next step is to listen—really listen. This probably sounds simpler than it is. Many people have an unfortunate habit in conversation of planning the next thing they're going to say rather than tuning in to what the other person is saying. It may help to think of your conversation as a tour of some aspect of this person's life. Be willing to go along for the ride, asking questions in ways that show your sincere interest and natural curiosity.

Listen in a way that feels natural, not forced. Your expressed interest ought to be genuine and consistent with your own personality.

## **Respond with an Occasional, Brief Nod or Sound**

This indicates that you're paying attention. Research shows that candidates who nod during interviews get the job more often than those who don't. Verbal cues such as "mm-hmm," "yeah," or even a grunt serve a similar purpose.

## **Paraphrase What the Speaker Says from Time to Time**

Doing so tells the speaker that you're still interested, especially when you can restate the important parts. This also serves to ensure that you understand what's been said. A good time to paraphrase is when you introduce a question.

For example:

*"You say you'd really love to go to Africa. Why do you think it would be a great place to visit?" Or, "It sounds like school has been really frustrating for you this spring. How is it harder for you now than last semester?"*

## **Maintain the Right Amount of Eye Contact**

Allow the speaker to catch your eye. Studies show that we tend to look more while listening, less while talking. We look away when we first start talking during a conversation. We look back when handing the conversation back to a partner. You want to avoid staring, which can be a sign of hostility or intrusiveness. But you shouldn't be afraid to look at the speaker, either. Avoiding eye contact altogether gives the impression of disinterest, nervousness, or lack of confidence. Be aware also that holding eye contact with a warm smile for several seconds may be interpreted as flirtatious or seductive.

## **Let Go of Your Own Agenda**

It's hard to be a good listener when you're struggling to direct the outcome of a conversation. Listening—especially when a friend or loved one is trying to work through a difficult emotional experience—requires instead that you let go of your desire to control the situation. In these instances, it may be best to follow the maxim: “Don't just do something, stand there.” Such passive, openhearted listening is rarely easy. More often, when loved ones are upset, people get the notion that they should “fix” what's wrong and “make it all better.” There are many drawbacks to this approach. One, it falsely presupposes that people can know and determine how others should live. Two, it can be overwhelming to believe that you have to come up with all the solutions to another person's pain. Faced with such a burden, many people simply avoid the person who's having difficulties, or try to minimize or deny the negative feelings the other person expresses. And finally, the optimum solutions to an individual's emotional problems rarely come from the outside; usually, the best answers are the ones individuals discover for themselves. Although we can't eliminate all the pain life presents our friends and loved ones, we can offer one another immeasurable support in difficult times simply by listening in authentic, empathetic ways. Often, it comes down to developing a mindful presence. The key is to look for those “emotional moments”—those unpredictable, but golden opportunities we have to simply stop and say to another, “I understand how you're feeling right now.”

## **Turn Off the Television**

TV often interferes with people's ability to listen to one another. We haven't done an official study of the frequency with which people choose the television over social interaction. But time and time again in our marriage lab, we have observed one partner make a bid for connection only to have the other partner “turn away” because he or she was more interested in the action on the television screen.

TV interferes with children's ability to connect as well. A 1999 Kaiser Family Foundation study showed that American kids watch an average of two hours and 45 minutes of TV a day. Some 17 percent of them watch over five hours daily. Compare this with other studies that show that kids spend just 45 minutes a week talking to their parents.

More than two thirds of kids over age 8 in the Kaiser study said their families keep the TV on during meals, the time when you'd most expect kids and parents to be talking to one another. But with the families' eyes glued to the set, the quality of interaction can only deteriorate. Indeed, indicators of discontent—such as not getting along with parents, unhappiness at school, and getting into trouble a lot—are strongly associated with high media use, the study's authors say.

So for the sake of your family relationships, limit TV watching. Be aware of occasions when TV gets in the way of your ability to respond lovingly to one another's bids for connection. And when you do watch television, try to choose programs you can enjoy watching together. Then talk about the TV programs afterward. Ask one another open-ended questions about what family members liked best and liked least about the program. How did the show make you feel? Did it remind you of any similar situations in your own life? If so, how? In other words, use the TV as a way to connect with one another, rather than a means of isolation.

## **Above All, Just Listen**

While understanding metaphors and all the various forms of non-verbal communication can boost your ability to connect with others, you won't get far without a strong foundation of good, basic listening skills. Your knack for drawing others out and expressing a genuine curiosity about their lives can be a real boon to bidding for connection and establishing satisfying relationships. Good listening skills can help you to feel easy in all sorts of social situations and to build the kind of rapport that leads to solid emotional bonds.

## **Examples**

Now let's take a look at a bad and a good date. Paul is a divorced guy in his late 40s who hasn't dated in several years. In fact, it's been years since he's even asked anybody out because he hates how vulnerable it makes him feel. Besides, he tells himself, all the great women are already taken. But then he meets Marly at a friend's birthday bash. She seems fun, attractive—a little shy, maybe—but, to his surprise, unattached. He gets her phone number from his friend, stumbles through an invitation to coffee and, incredible as it seems, she agrees.

Marly is surprised that she agreed as well. Just a few months out of a bad split-up, she had decided to take a break from dating. But Paul gets good reviews from Greg, their mutual friend. Still, there's nothing she hates worse than a first date. She's just no good at making small talk.

Paul arrives at the coffee shop 15 minutes early. Marly is about 10 minutes late. They make eye contact as soon as she walks in the door. She flashes a weak, strained smile and heads toward his table.

"Hi there," he says as she takes a seat. He notices that she looks smaller than she did at the party. And she seems awfully nervous as she pulls her raincoat close around her body.

"Hi."

"Did you have any trouble finding it?"

"No."

"Good." She looks toward the menu hanging over the counter.



*"It's self-serve. Let me get you something."*

*"Thanks."*

*"What would you like?"*

*"Um. Just coffee. Black."*

He returns and sets the Styrofoam cups on the table. *"Here you go."*

*"Thanks."*

*"So...gee,"* Paul offers. *"I had a great time at Greg and Susan's the other night."*

*"Yeah, it was nice."*

*"Greg's a great guy."*



*"Yeah. He's so funny."*

*"Susan, too."*

*"I don't know Susan as well."*

*"Do you live near here?"* Paul asks.

*"No. I live on the Eastside,"* Marly replies.

*"But you work around here?"*

*"Yeah. Sixth and Maple."*

*"That's where AltaGuard is."*

*"Right."*

*"So that's where you work?"*

*"Um-hmm."*

*"That's quite a commute."*

*"Yeah. But I'm getting used to it."*

*"AltaGuard is an insurance company, right?"*

*"Um-hmm."*

*"What do you do there?"*

*"Data entry."*

And so it goes...like a bad job interview. *"I figured she was shy, but this is ridiculous,"* Paul says to himself. *"She's bordering on depressive. Then again, maybe it's me. Maybe she doesn't like bald guys. Maybe I should have met her at a nicer place. Maybe she's sorry she came."* And as the grilling continues, Paul's interior monologue gets gloomier and gloomier. *"This isn't working. I shouldn't have done this. Greg should have warned me. How do I get out of this?"*

Good question. Let's see how this conversation—this bid for relationship—might go if Paul makes just a few adjustments in the questions he asks and Marly responds with a little more information. We'll take it from Paul's arrival with the coffee.



"Here you go."

"Thanks."

"So...gee, I had a great time at Greg and Susan's the other night."

"Yeah, it was nice."

"Greg and I go way back. I think I told you, we were college roommates."

"That's right. At Ohio State."

"And how do you know them?"

"Greg and I used to work together."

"At that insurance company on the East Side?"

"Yeah. SafeCore."

"Right. I remember Greg hated that place! His boss was this real neurotic... oh, no... don't tell me... you were his boss, right?"

Marly laughs. "No. Thank goodness. That was Roberta."

"Right! 'Her Royal Majesty Roberta!' So do you still work there?"

"No, I'm at AltaGuard now."

"So did you guys get t-shirts made that said, 'I survived the Reign of Roberta—1999?'"

Marly smiles. "No. But Greg and Susan took me out for a great lunch after I quit."

"What made you finally decide to leave?"

"I dunno. I just woke up one day and I knew I couldn't take it one more minute. I called in sick and I started applying for other jobs that same day."

"I bet it didn't take you long to find something."

"About a month."

"So what's your new job like?"

"It's OK. It's better than SafeCore."

"In what way?"

"The people are more real, for one thing."

"What do you mean by real?"

"Well, you know... it's like if you're having a bad day, you don't have to fake it."

"For example?"

"Well, take last Thursday. I had just gotten my grades from last semester..."

"You're in school?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to get out of this insurance thing. You see, what I'm really interested in is anthropology..."

"That's so cool. I almost majored in anthropology!"

“ because  
he uses  
open-ended  
questions  
that get  
to the  
heart of  
her values  
and  
dreams,  
she can’t  
help but  
respond ”

“You did?”

“But then I switched to business instead. Big mistake. But you were telling me about what you want to do...”

“Yeah because insurance, it’s just so...boring. But if I can get a masters in anthropology I figure...”

And they’re off. What makes the difference? Paul uses a little humor for one thing. But more than that, it’s the way he expresses interest in Marly’s life. She’s still shy initially, so he’s still got to draw her out with lots of questions. But this time, he’s not asking for simple data. Because he uses open-ended questions that get to the heart of her values and dreams, she can’t help but respond. His interest in the “real” Marly makes her feel more warmly toward him and he can tell. This raises his spirits and prevents him from becoming self-conscious and gloomy. Instead, he keeps his focus where it belongs, on Marly. And she’s getting more interesting to him by the minute. It feels to him that he may get what he’s bidding for—an emotional connection.

