



COMMUNICATING NEEDS IN RELATIONSHIPS

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Thank you for honoring the work and the care behind it.

While it can be used as a tool to supplement an existing therapeutic
relationship with a licensed mental health professional (LMHC, LCSW,
LMFT, LPC, or a
Licensed Psychologist), this resource should NOT be used as a substitute for
therapy.

If you find that this resource brings up feelings and thoughts that are
challenging to deal with on your own or with a trusted person, I encourage
you to seek therapy
to continue your healing journey.

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INTRODUCTION

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Why Communicating Needs Matters for Emotional Health and Connection:

Every relationship—whether with family, friends, a partner, colleagues, or a therapist—grows stronger when needs are spoken with honesty and care. Naming our needs creates clarity, trust, and emotional safety. It lifts the burden of guessing, assuming, or hoping someone will “just know.”

The Difference Between Needs, Wants, and Expectations:

Part of healthy communication is learning to distinguish between needs, wants, and expectations:

- Needs are the essentials that help a relationship feel safe and sustainable. They can be individual (unique to you) or mutual (shared by both people).
- Wants are meaningful but not essential—things that enrich an experience but won't break the bond if unmet.
- Expectations are the ways we hope someone will show up, but like boundaries, they require clear and respectful communication.

Soulfull Note to Self:

The truth is, none of us share the exact same background, culture, or family story. What feels natural to one person may never cross another's mind. Communication is the bridge that honors differences and deepens connection.

It's also important to note the difference between boundaries and expectations.

A boundary isn't about controlling another person; it's about protecting your well-being when your needs aren't respected. When expressed with clarity and respect, these distinctions invite deeper understanding, healthier bonds, and more soul-nourishing connections (for more on boundaries, download SoulFull Steps Vol. 11: Boundaries).

STEPS ACROSS RELATIONSHIP TYPES

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Note: While these steps are tailored to specific relationship categories, many apply across all types of relationships.

Family Relationships: For some families, communicating needs within family may come quite naturally. For others, especially for families within collectivist cultures such as Black families, it can feel especially difficult because we tend to center the needs of the greater good over the individual. That's not a bad thing, however; it can sometimes make us believe that our individual needs don't matter at all, and that is simply not true. Common barriers include long histories of having needs dismissed, rigid family roles (i.e., "the responsible one"), and cultural or generational norms that dictate what's considered "respectful." For example, in some of our families, it may be viewed as disrespectful for a child—regardless of age—to voice needs to a parent.

Helpful strategies:

- Use "I" statements ("I feel... when... because I need...").
- Balance respect for traditions with self-advocacy. Honoring traditions should not require silence about your pain or struggles.
- Acknowledge their perspective while holding your truth. Acknowledging does not mean agreeing—it's about empathy and respect.

Example: "I appreciate how much you care. I also need some independence in making this decision."

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Committed Romantic Relationships: Romantic relationships, like family, thrive on emotional safety. Vulnerability in expressing needs is foundational. Challenges often stem from lack of vulnerability, attachment wounds, fear of rejection, or assumptions shaped by past experiences.

Helpful strategies:

- Lead with vulnerability, not blame. Instead of “You always make me mad!” try “I feel hurt when my feelings seem dismissed.” Blame fuels conflict; vulnerability fosters intimacy.
- Be specific. Clarify whether you need reassurance, quality time, space, or intimacy. Clear requests reduce guessing and increase the chances of your partner meeting your needs accurately.
- Frame requests positively. Focus on what you want, not what you don’t.

Example: “I’d love to spend more time with you,” instead of “I hate when you spend all day on the golf course.”

Friendships: Friendship is such a special relationship. It provides connection in unique ways from other kinds of relationships. It's true though, that some people see friendship as purely social, overlooking its emotional dimension. For this reason, voicing needs in friendships may feel unusual or even burdensome. Challenges in communicating needs in friendships may include: uneven effort, unspoken expectations, and fear of being a burden.

Helpful strategies:

- Express gratitude before naming needs. Acknowledging what works well builds respect and lowers defenses.
- Be clear about boundaries regarding time, energy, and emotional availability.
- Create reciprocity by inviting your friend to share their needs as well.

Example: "I love our time together. I also need solo recharge days, so if I say no to plans, it's not about you."

Professional Settings: Workplaces occupy much of our time and energy, making it essential to state needs for support; and yet, society has shaped some of us to believe that speaking our needs in our professional settings is a “no-no.” Especially if we are navigating experiences with challenging bosses, or co-workers. This is not to say that we use our boss’s office as a therapy session. But it is appropriate to use their office hours to share the specific job-related challenges you are facing, so that they can best provide you with the assistance you need. Some additional barriers often include fear of conflict, fear of retaliation and fear of losing one’s job.

Helpful strategies:

- Be concise and specific—avoid emotional overload.
- Frame requests as mutually beneficial (“This will help me do my best work”).
- Use written follow-ups for clarity.

Example: “To meet this deadline effectively, I’ll need an extra two days or additional support. Which option works best?”

With a Therapist or Doctor: Even with trained professionals, it's important to voice your needs. While they bring a certain level of knowledge and expertise, *you are the expert in your lived experience*. Challenges may include authority imbalances, feeling dismissed, or shame around asking.

Helpful strategies:

- Prepare notes about symptoms, feelings, or questions.
- Be honest, even when it feels uncomfortable.
- Ask clarifying questions until you feel understood.

Example: "I notice my anxiety increases at night. Can we explore medication options or coping strategies for that time?"

FOUNDATION: PREPARING YOURSELF

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Self-Awareness: Start by identifying what you truly need—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Take a few minutes to reflect and write some of your needs down. You may want to use this space to focus on a specific kind of relationship (ie., romantic, friendship, family, etc.). If you want to focus on multiple kinds of relationships, you may need additional paper.

Next, consider the important relationships in your life right now. Ask yourself: Which needs have I communicated that remain unmet? Which expectations have I never actually spoken aloud?

Grounding Practices

- Deep breathing can bring clarity and calm. When you're about to express a need—especially if you're not used to doing so—it's normal to feel anxious. A few steady breaths can reduce that tension.
- Journaling can also help. Writing down your thoughts before a conversation encourages clarity and can reveal emotional barriers that make self-expression harder.

Affirmation: My needs are valid and worth expressing.

Choosing the Right Time & Space

Timing and setting make a big difference.

- Avoid high-stress or distracted moments, as these can escalate conflict instead of fostering repair. Instead, aim for calm, respectful environments.
- Avoid interrupting or talking over each other.
- Avoid name-calling, shaming, or blaming.

If you need a pause, say, “I need a moment to gather my thoughts” or “I need a break.” Offer a time frame for when you'll return, and if you need more time, communicate that, too.

- “I Feel” Framework: I feel ___ when ___ because ___. I need ___.
- Boundary Statements: “That doesn’t work for me. What does work is...”
- Check-Ins: Schedule regular conversations for updates and adjustments.
- Compassion & Directness: Speak truthfully while honoring the relationship.

Note to Self:

Communicating needs is not selfish—it’s an act of love for yourself and others.

Healthy relationships grow stronger when needs are named and respected.

You don’t control their response, only your clarity and respect.

Part I: Self-Awareness

1. What do I really need right now (Check all that apply)?

- ☐ Emotional (comfort, reassurance, honesty, love)
- ☐ Physical (rest, space, help with tasks, touch)
- ☐ Mental (clarity, information, focus time)
- ☐ Spiritual (connection, quiet, meaning, ritual)

Write your need in one sentence:

2. Is this a need, or an expectation?

My need is:

My expectation was:

3. What emotions am I feeling about this?

Part II: Reflection After Communicating

After having a conversation with someone in which you practiced stating your needs, reflect on the following:

Did I speak with clarity and kindness?

How did the other person respond?

How do I feel now?

What did I learn for next time?

NOTES

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About

THE CREATOR

I'm a Midwestern girl raised in a home adorned in Black art, music, literature, and culture. From Faith Ringgold on the walls, to Toni Morrison on the shelves, and old-school R&B spinning through the house, my upbringing instilled a deep pride in my heritage, and a love for storytelling, creativity, and community that still guides me today.



My academic path took a few turns—Nursing, and then Psychology at Fisk University, a master's in Sociology, and ultimately a second master's in Counselor Education—each step clarifying my calling to become a therapist. Through personal experiences, faith, and growth, I felt led toward soul-centered, culturally grounded mental health work.

When I'm not in session, I'm creating, coloring, crocheting, listening to music, podcasts or audiobooks, or watching historical and sociocultural documentaries and classic Black sitcoms. I'm a proud member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., a wife to my best friend, a mama to one radiant daughter, a dog mom, and a caregiver in the sandwich generation—held up by strong women, deep friendships, and a whole lot of love.