

FAMILY COMMUNICATION GUIDE

How to Talk, Listen, Set Boundaries, and Rebuild Trust During Recovery

Recovery changes more than one person.

When substance use has affected a family, communication can become shaped by fear, anger, secrecy, guilt, resentment, disappointment, and distrust.

One person may feel watched.

Another may feel ignored.

Someone may constantly ask questions.

Someone else may stop talking altogether.

Families can begin reacting to what they **expect** to happen instead of what is actually happening.

Healthy communication does not mean avoiding difficult conversations.

It means learning how to have difficult conversations without making them more destructive.

The goal isn't perfect communication.

The goal is to create a family environment where people can be **honest, accountable, respectful, and safe enough to talk.**

1. START WITH ONE IMPORTANT IDEA

You can control your communication.

You cannot control another person's response.

You can:

Speak clearly.

Listen.

Ask questions.

Set boundaries.

Tell the truth.

Apologize.

Follow through.

Choose when to end an unhealthy conversation.

You cannot:

Force someone to understand.

Force someone to change.

Force someone to tell the truth.

Force someone into recovery.

Control another person's emotions.

Healthy communication begins when each person takes responsibility for their own side of the conversation.

2. SEPARATE THREE THINGS

Before reacting, separate:

WHAT HAPPENED

The observable facts.

WHAT I THOUGHT IT MEANT

Your interpretation.

HOW I RESPONDED

Your behavior.

EXAMPLE

What happened:

My son came home an hour later than expected.

What I thought it meant:

"He's using again."

What I felt:

Fear.

What I did:

Immediately accused him.

Those are not the same thing.

The late arrival was a fact.

The belief about substance use was an interpretation.

The accusation was a response.

BEFORE REACTING, ASK:

What do I know?

What am I assuming?

That small distinction can completely change a conversation.

3. PAUSE BEFORE RESPONDING

When emotions become intense, communication usually becomes less effective.

Before answering:

P.A.U.S.E.

P — PAUSE

Don't immediately react.

A — ACKNOWLEDGE

What emotion are you experiencing?

U — UNDERSTAND

What are you telling yourself this situation means?

S — SLOW DOWN

Take several breaths. Lower your voice.

E — ENGAGE INTENTIONALLY

Ask yourself:

"What am I trying to accomplish with what I'm about to say?"

If the answer is:

"Make them feel bad."

"Prove I'm right."

"Punish them."

"Get even."

"Win."

It may not be the right time for the conversation.

4. USE "I" STATEMENTS

Compare:

ACCUSATION

"You never tell the truth."

with:

COMMUNICATION

"I feel anxious when plans change and I don't hear from you because of what we've experienced in the past. I need better communication when you're going to be late."

A useful structure is:

I FEEL _____ WHEN _____ BECAUSE _____. WHAT I NEED IS _____.

MY EXAMPLE:

I feel:

When:

Because:

What I need is:

5. DESCRIBE BEHAVIOR—DON'T LABEL THE PERSON

Instead of:

"You're selfish."

Try:

"When you didn't call, I felt like our agreement wasn't being respected."

Instead of:

"You're a liar."

Try:

"What you're telling me now doesn't match what you told me yesterday."

Instead of:

"You're acting like an addict."

Try:

"I've noticed you've been isolating and missing meetings this week. I'm concerned."

Labels attack identity.

Specific observations create something that can actually be discussed.

6. LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

Listening does not mean agreeing.

It means trying to understand what another person is communicating before deciding how you will respond.

Try:

"Tell me more."

"What happened?"

"What were you feeling?"

"What did you think that meant?"

"What do you need from me right now?"

Then summarize:

"What I'm hearing is _____. Did I understand you correctly?"

You may still disagree.

But now you're disagreeing with what the person actually said—not what you assumed they meant.

7. VALIDATION IS NOT AGREEMENT

Validation means recognizing another person's emotional experience.

You can say:

"I understand why you're frustrated."

without saying:

"You're right."

You can say:

"That sounds painful."

without saying:

"Your behavior was acceptable."

You can say:

"I understand why you felt angry."

and still say:

"Yelling at me isn't okay."

Both things can be true.

EMOTION:

"I understand that you're angry."

BOUNDARY:

"I'm willing to talk about it, but I'm not willing to be yelled at."

That is validation with accountability.

8. ASK: "DO YOU WANT SUPPORT OR SOLUTIONS?"

Families often immediately begin solving problems.

Sometimes the person simply wants to be heard.

Ask:

"Do you want me to listen, or do you want help figuring out what to do?"

That one question can prevent a surprising number of arguments.

9. DON'T INTERROGATE

After addiction has damaged trust, family members may feel compelled to investigate everything.

"Where were you?"

"Who were you with?"

"Why didn't you answer?"

"Are you lying?"

"Did you use?"

"Let me see your phone."

Fear can turn communication into surveillance.

Instead, address the behavior creating concern.

For example:

"You've come home late three nights this week and stopped going to meetings. Those changes concern me. Can we talk about what's happening?"

That is very different from:

"I know you're using again."

10. DON'T HAVE IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS DURING ESCALATION

If someone is:

Yelling.

Threatening.

Highly agitated.

Intoxicated.

Unable to listen.

Or emotionally overwhelmed.

It may not be the right time to resolve the issue.

Try:

"This conversation matters to me, and I don't think we're going to solve it while we're both this upset. I'm going to take 30 minutes, and then I'd like to continue."

Taking a break is different from abandoning the conversation.

Whenever appropriate, say **when you intend to return to it.**

11. KNOW THE FOUR CONVERSATION KILLERS

1. "YOU ALWAYS..."

"You always screw everything up."

2. "YOU NEVER..."

"You never think about anyone else."

3. MIND READING

"I know exactly why you did that."

4. BRINGING UP EVERYTHING

Turning today's problem into a trial covering the last ten years.

Stay with:

What happened today?

What needs to happen next?

Past patterns may need to be addressed—but not every past mistake belongs in every present disagreement.

12. BOUNDARIES ARE COMMUNICATION

A boundary isn't primarily about controlling someone else's behavior.

It communicates what **you will do**.

CONTROL:

"You can't drink."

BOUNDARY:

"Alcohol and drugs aren't permitted in our home. If you bring substances into the house, you won't be able to stay here."

CONTROL:

"You have to tell me everywhere you go."

BOUNDARY:

"If you're using my vehicle, I need to know where the vehicle is and when it will be returned."

CONTROL:

"You need to stop asking me for money."

BOUNDARY:

"I'm not going to provide cash. I'm willing to help directly with agreed-upon necessities."

A strong boundary contains:

The situation

-

Your response

-

Consistent follow-through

13. USE THIS BOUNDARY FORMULA

WHEN _____ HAPPENS, I WILL _____ BECAUSE _____.

Example:

"When yelling starts, I will end the conversation and return to it when we're both calmer because I want us to communicate respectfully."

MY BOUNDARY:

When:

I will:

Because:

14. REBUILD TRUST THROUGH BEHAVIOR

Families often ask:

"How do we trust each other again?"

Trust usually doesn't return because of one conversation.

It develops through consistency.

WORDS + ACTIONS + TIME = TRUST

Instead of demanding:

"You need to trust me."

Try:

"I understand why trust isn't there yet. I'm going to focus on being consistent."

And instead of:

"I'll never trust you again."

Try:

"I want trust to return. I need to see consistent behavior over time."

Both sides now have something measurable to work toward.

15. WHEN SOMEONE MAKES A MISTAKE

Try to avoid immediately turning a mistake into an identity.

Instead of:

"See? You haven't changed."

Try:

"What happened?"

Then:

"What can you learn from this?"

And:

"What needs to happen next?"

Accountability matters.

Shame and accountability are not the same thing.

Accountability says:

"This behavior needs to change."

Shame says:

"You are the problem."

16. WHEN YOU SUSPECT RELAPSE

Don't begin with an accusation unless there is an immediate safety issue requiring action.

Try:

"I've noticed some changes that concern me. You've been isolating, sleeping differently, and missing things that were important to you. I'm worried about you. What's happening?"

If substance use has occurred:

Focus first on safety.

Then determine what professional/recovery support is needed.

Then address boundaries and consequences.

Trying to win an argument in that moment is rarely the most important objective.

17. WHEN YOUR LOVED ONE SAYS "I'M FINE"

Instead of immediately arguing:

"No, you're not."

Try:

"Okay. I hear you. I've noticed you've been quieter and more isolated this week. If something is going on, I'm available to listen."

You communicated concern.

You described observable behavior.

You left the door open.

18. WHEN THEY SAY "YOU DON'T TRUST ME"

Try:

"You're right that trust isn't fully rebuilt yet. I want it to be. For me, trust is going to come from consistency over time—not from me checking everything you do."

That is honest without being punitive.

19. WHEN THE FAMILY MEMBER IS ANGRY

Family members are allowed to be angry.

Recovery does not require pretending the past didn't happen.

But ask:

What do I want my anger to accomplish?

If there are unresolved wounds, consider addressing them with a qualified counselor rather than expecting every family dinner to become therapy.

You can say:

"I love you and support your recovery. I'm also still hurt by some things that happened. I'm working through those feelings too."

Both can be true.

20. APOLOGIZE EFFECTIVELY

A useful apology isn't:

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Try:

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I was scared, but yelling wasn't helpful. Next time I'm going to take a few minutes before responding."

A meaningful apology contains:

WHAT I DID

HOW IT AFFECTED YOU

WHAT I WILL DO DIFFERENTLY

Apology + changed behavior is more powerful than apology alone.

21. FAMILY WEEKLY CHECK-IN

Set aside approximately 15–20 minutes once a week.

This is not an interrogation.

Each person answers:

ONE THING THAT WENT WELL THIS WEEK:

ONE THING THAT WAS DIFFICULT:

SOMETHING I APPRECIATED ABOUT YOU:

SOMETHING I NEED:

SOMETHING I CAN DO BETTER:

SOMETHING WE SHOULD DISCUSS:

ONE THING WE CAN DO TOGETHER THIS WEEK:

Then end the meeting.

Don't let a 20-minute check-in turn into a two-hour argument.

22. FAMILY COMMUNICATION AGREEMENT

As a family, consider agreeing:

- ☐ We will avoid name-calling.
- ☐ We will not threaten each other.
- ☐ We will not intentionally humiliate each other.
- ☐ We will try not to interrupt.
- ☐ We will distinguish facts from assumptions.
- ☐ We will communicate boundaries clearly.
- ☐ We will avoid important arguments when someone is intoxicated.
- ☐ We can request a break when emotions become overwhelming.
- ☐ If we take a break, we will make a reasonable effort to return to the conversation.
- ☐ We will ask for clarification before assuming intent.
- ☐ We will acknowledge progress.

- ☐ We will address behavior rather than attacking identity.
- ☐ We will ask for professional help when the problem exceeds what our family can manage.

SOMETHING ELSE OUR FAMILY NEEDS:

23. THE 60-SECOND COMMUNICATION RESET

Before responding during a difficult conversation, ask:

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

WHAT AM I ASSUMING IT MEANS?

WHAT AM I FEELING?

WHAT DO I WANT TO SAY?

WHAT DO I ACTUALLY NEED TO COMMUNICATE?

That final question can change the entire conversation.

24. PHRASES THAT HELP

Instead of:

"What's wrong with you?"

Try:

"What's happening for you right now?"

Instead of:

"You're overreacting."

Try:

"I can see this is affecting you strongly."

Instead of:

"Calm down."

Try:

"Do you want a few minutes before we continue?"

Instead of:

"You never listen."

Try:

"I don't feel heard right now."

Instead of:

"I know you're lying."

Try:

"Something about this isn't adding up for me. Can we go through it again?"

Instead of:

"You haven't changed."

Try:

"This behavior reminds me of patterns that hurt us before, and that's why I'm concerned."

Instead of:

"After everything I've done for you..."

Try:

"I want to support you, but I need to be clear about what I can and cannot continue doing."

25. REMEMBER THE PERSON

Your loved one is more than their addiction.

Your parent is still your parent.

Your child is still your child.

Your spouse is still your spouse.

Your sibling is still your sibling.

Talk about things other than recovery.

Laugh.

Eat together.

Watch a game.

Walk.

Cook.

Celebrate progress.

Build new memories.

Recovery shouldn't make addiction the subject of every conversation.

Part of recovery is rediscovering the relationship underneath it.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION PLAN

WHEN CONFLICT STARTS, OUR FAMILY WILL:

WHEN SOMEONE NEEDS A BREAK, WE WILL:

WE WILL RETURN TO THE CONVERSATION:

OUR MOST IMPORTANT BOUNDARY IS:

ONE COMMUNICATION PATTERN WE WANT TO STOP:

ONE NEW PATTERN WE WANT TO PRACTICE:

WHEN WE CANNOT SOLVE SOMETHING OURSELVES, WE WILL CONTACT:

REMEMBER

Listen before assuming.

Ask before accusing.

Describe behavior instead of attacking character.

Validate feelings without excusing harmful behavior.

Set boundaries instead of making threats.

Allow trust to rebuild through consistency.

Know when a conversation needs professional support.

You don't have to communicate perfectly.

You simply have to become a little more intentional about what happens between the feeling and the response.

PAUSE → LISTEN → CLARIFY → RESPOND

CENSOZO | MINDSTRONG

Supporting the Person. Supporting the Family. Supporting the Journey.

Recovery rarely affects only one person.

This guide can be used alongside the:

Family Coming Home From Rehab Guide

Trigger Identification Worksheet

CBT Triangle Worksheet

Craving Tracker

30-Day Recovery Calendar

and the **MindStrong Workbook**.

These resources are designed to encourage greater awareness of thoughts, emotions, behaviors, communication patterns, triggers, coping strategies, and healthier responses.

IMPORTANT

This guide is intended for general educational and personal-development purposes. It is not family therapy, psychotherapy, medical advice, addiction treatment, or a substitute for professional care.

If communication involves threats, violence, abuse, coercion, or immediate safety concerns, prioritize safety and seek appropriate professional or emergency assistance rather than relying solely on communication techniques.

In the United States, call or text **988** for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. For substance-use treatment information and referrals, contact **SAMHSA's National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357)**. For an immediate medical or safety emergency, call **911**.