

RCA

Safety Guidelines for Couples' Step Work and Recovery Meetings

*Three of RCA's Founders Share
Their Experience, Strength and Hope*



Many recovering couples have found that the following guidelines greatly enhance their ability to communicate.

1. It is OK to feel.

As you share at RCA recovery meetings and as you work RCA's Twelve Steps, you may find that old and sometimes forgotten memories will surface. Some of you will be familiar with the emotions these memories elicit, but for others, this will be a new experience. There will be times when you'll feel anger, sadness or anxiety about the problems you are discussing. It is perfectly okay to feel the emotions that arise and to talk about them with each other.

Occasionally some of your feelings may seem stuck or blocked; in fact, one of your difficulties as a couple may be that one or both of you are not able to feel emotions. At other times, you may feel like your emotions are overwhelming.

Your work here may trigger the memory of some type of abuse you experienced in the past. If it does, an overwhelming feeling of sadness, anxiety or anger is likely to surface. As these memories and feelings surface, you are encouraged to take time out and talk over your feelings with your partner or your couple sponsors.

You have permission to feel your emotions. Your body / mind will allow you to feel only the level of emotion you are capable of handling at any given

time. You are encouraged not to judge each other's feelings. Your feelings are never right or wrong, they are simply your feelings -- real for you at the time you are feeling them. Remember that it is always okay to feel.

2. It is OK to make mistakes.

Some of us were told in our growing-up families that we were worthless and wouldn't amount to anything. We were always seen as making mistakes or causing trouble. No matter what we accomplished, it never seemed good enough. We felt inadequate and became afraid of making mistakes, and we may have covered up our actual mistakes through dishonesty. For us, mistakes equal failure and self-disappointment.

Some of us concluded that only if we could be perfect could we be acceptable as people. Because of the shaming and blaming we experienced, we've become defensive about being criticized and accused of making mistakes.

Some of us suffer self-criticism stemming from our need to be perfect in our relationship, leading to a kind of wall that keeps us apart and distant from our partner. It is okay to let our partners see our imperfections and limitations. It is okay to ask for advice, and to involve others in our decisions. It is okay to talk about our anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. It is okay to admit our mistakes and see our own limits.

3. It is OK to have respectful conflict.

Especially for couples new to RCA, many of you have problems which you've been entirely unable to resolve. Perhaps they remain unsolved because you've been unwilling to endure the conflict you knew would arise by facing them. Perhaps you have avoided arguments and fights of any kind.

Be assured that it's okay to fight. Most of us find that as we continue to work the RCA program we learn ways to fight in a healthy, safe manner.

If you reach a point where the conflict you're experiencing is getting out of control, you may need to take a timeout and contact your sponsor couple. They can help you set limits so that the conflict doesn't become destructive to either one of you.

4. It is OK to have needs and ask for them to be met.

It's all right for you to have needs. It is okay, for example, to need your partner to listen to you or to help arrange the babysitting. Begin to recognize your needs, and begin expressing them to your partner.

This is not implying, however, that your relationship is at a point now (or that it will ever be) where you can expect your partner to have the ability to meet all your needs. No relationship can meet all your needs. There will always be some areas which have to be fulfilled in other places, regardless of the level of intimacy with your partner.

5. It is important to respect your partner.

No self-righteous statements

Making self-righteous statements, such as declaring how wonderful you are, or how well you do things in comparison to your partner, is discouraged. It is not fair to build points by putting your partner down. You are encouraged to begin looking at the times you blame your partner for the state of your relationship.

No baiting or button-pushing

By this point in your relationship, you are aware that certain things you do or say to each other will automatically create a reaction -- for example, a statement that makes your partner cry or become angry. You are encouraged to begin identifying these "buttons" and stop pushing them.

No case-building

Many partners engage in what is called "case-building" -- a recitation of past events which prove one partner's rationale for why the problems of the relationship are the other partner's fault. For example, if your partner forgot to give you a present on your birthday eight years ago, this incident should not be resurrected as an example of how she (or he) neglects you.

No taking each other's inventory

As another way of respecting your partner, do not assess your partner's needs, feelings or problems. Avoid trying to gauge your partner's strengths, weaknesses or abilities. In 12-step lingo, this is called taking another person's inventory, and it's a surefire way to double the discord. Try not to make assumptions or interpretations about your partner's

family of origin. Your job in taking RCA's Twelve Steps is to take only your own inventory, not your partner's.

6. It is important to respect yourself.

Pay attention to what the little voice in your head is saying about you. Be aware of the times and ways you put yourself down -- and stop doing so. Try to build yourself up by acknowledging your positive traits and actions.

Take responsibility for your story -- the actions of your past.

It is important for you to be accountable for your own story -- your family, your actions (both positive and negative), your accomplishments and the consequences of your behavior. It is important to take credit for your progress and work in recovery.

No self-pity

Respecting yourself also means not indulging in self-pity. That means giving up feelings about how hard your life has been compared to others, how unfairly you've been treated.

Many of us who are victims of various types of abuse will recognize that it's easy to get stuck in the victim role. One way to know if you are stuck is that you experience ongoing anger. If this is the case, please seek the help of a therapist to help you move beyond feeling like a victim and beyond acting like a victim. It's difficult to have a relationship with your partner if you are continually blaming your partner for things that happened to you at

the hands of others.

While your past certainly plays a role in your present life, it will be difficult for you to move ahead until you learn from your past and let it go.

7. What you say here, let it stay here.

As you work the RCA Steps and use the program tools such as "Meetings of Two," some of your discussions will be extremely sensitive. If you have close friendships outside this relationship, respect the anonymity of the process on which you are about to embark. Sharing your partner's story or the process that you are going through with a co-worker or friend is not appropriate.

This information must be kept confidential unless you give each other permission to share it. The sponsors you've chosen to help you work the program may be privileged to some of these conversations, but even then you must both agree before either of you can divulge anything.

8. Rid yourself of expectations.

Finally, release specific expectations for how this process will work. The process will take on a life of its own as we move into it and through it. There is no set timetable for working through the RCA program. No one is expected to work through the Twelve Steps in a few hours. You may work intensively for days or weeks at a time, and then back off for a while to digest what you have learned. At other times, you may need to seek individual

help for issues that arise. Sometimes you might simply need a vacation from the intensity of the process. Conversely, you may find that you've gotten away from the process for a while, and that you need to re-commit to it. Don't criticize yourselves if it all seems to be taking longer than you had anticipated.

Remember, there is no quick fix for relationships. Implementing changes and sticking with them until they feel normal takes practice -- sometimes lots of practice. It can take months or years for the peace and serenity you seek to be the dominant force in your relationship.

Above all, let this be a gentle process for you. Take "gentleness breaks" -- time-outs for a walk in the park, reading an inspirational book, flying a kite with a child, watching a sunset.

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Adapted from the writings of three of RCA's founders ("Open Hearts, Renewing Relationships With Recovery, Romance & Reality"). "Open Hearts" portion re-printed with permission by Gentle Path Press 2014.