

3 Key Principles for Successful Needs Based Negotiation

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Needs-based negotiation with your partner can be a synergistic and supportive experience. It can be something that you look forward to in your relationship. When it goes well, you learn about yourself and your partner and discover new ways of meeting needs for you both.

There are many layers of consciousness, knowledge, and skill that contribute to a successful negotiation. A successful negotiation is one in which honor and connection lead to a way forward, and to a plan of action that considers and meets everyone's needs in that situation. For now, let's focus on three fundamental principles that help with successful needs-based negotiation.

1.) Everyone's perspective, feelings and needs are valid and will be heard.

When this is trusted, you will avoid a lot of initial reactivity. From the beginning, you can build confidence by stating this out loud as a form of reassurance. This is also a good way to verify that both of you have the energy to listen and be present without being hijacked by judgment and reactivity. Setting up a structure will help you feel confident that you can fulfill your commitment to be present. Set a two minute time limit to share, and then a four minute time limit to reflect back what you heard and make guesses about the feelings and needs present. Use the feelings and needs list! When someone is talking for more than two minutes, the probability that they will be clearly heard decreases and the probability for reactivity increases.

Engaging this first negotiation skill means resisting the temptation to correct your partner's thinking, information, and perceptions. Just listening and reflecting is all you will do. You will have a chance to share your experience during your turn.

Listening also means tolerating the discomfort of seeing your partner while they are upset; which might mean tolerating your own insecurity regarding acceptance and being seen for who you are. But tolerating doesn't just mean gritting your teeth and enduring it. It means doing something to soothe yourself such as deep breathing, rubbing a smooth stone, saying a mantra to yourself, or practicing a visualization. Your self-soothing practice is more important than hearing every word your partner says. In other words, it's better to shuttle back and forth between your self-soothing practice and hearing what your partner says than to allow reactivity to take over. You can always ask your partner to repeat anything you miss.

2.) Learn to hear "no" as an expression of needs

In successful needs-based negotiation, when your partner says "no" to a request you can respond with curiosity. For example, you might say, "What needs do you think will go unmet for you if you say 'yes' to my request?" Or "What needs are you protecting when you say 'no' to my request?" One aspect of increasing your ability to listen is to practice hearing no as an indirect expression of needs. For partners who feel aversion to the word "need," here are some colloquial ways of asking about needs: "What are you valuing most in this situation?"

"Sounds like there is something more important up for you about this. Would you be willing to say what that is?"

"What gets in your way of saying yes?"

"What part of my request doesn't work?"

"What would work better for you?"

3.) Learn to say "no" and stay connected to yourself and your partner

Over the years, I have seen many relationships end because one partner couldn't set a boundary and say "no" with connection. The pull to say "yes" when you really want to say "no" is often surrounded by guilt, obligation, and resentment. When this happens repeatedly, it may result in a moment when your loss of autonomy hits a critical mass, and the only way you can see to find it again is to end the relationship. Ending the relationship in this state you might say things like: "I've lost who I am," "I just don't want to compromise anymore," "Our whole life revolved around you," "We just aren't right for each other," "You are always pressuring me into things," "I am overwhelmed and I just need space." Learning to say "no" with connection allows you to care for the relationship while maintaining integrity and authenticity. Here are three things that will help you say "no" with connection:

1. Express your caring and ask for support. For example, "I love contributing to you and care so much about you. I know that part of being healthy is to take care of myself, but saying 'no' is scary for me. If you're willing, I would love to hear that you can hear my no and keep loving me even though you feel disappointed."
2. Set boundaries around any lashing out that your partner does when you say "no." For example, "When I say 'no' and you start naming all the things you have said yes to, I feel discouraged and need respect. Could you put down the relationship scorecard and propose a different request that would meet your needs?" When your "no" is met with convincing, minimizing, criticism, comparing, analysis, pouting, rage, or punishment, set an immediate boundary or immediately seek help if you can't do it yet. Let your partner know that this is not okay with you, and that you welcome curiosity about your no, finding ways to create more mutuality, and engaging in needs-based negotiation.
3. Consistently participate in meaningful activities outside of your partnership. Staying engaged with what's uniquely meaningful, fun, or nourishing for you helps you maintain the confidence to say "no," and trust that you can meet your needs in other ways if your partner is not able to hear you in the moment.

The last thing to remember about needs-based negotiation is that when it gets stuck, it is often because one or both of you are caught in attachment to preferences and your favorite strategies to meet needs. You have mixed needs and strategies together. When the universal needs alive for each of you in a given situation are not named clearly, there is no space to negotiate new strategies to meet them. You can keep needs alive in your negotiation by writing them on a white board, writing them on index cards, or using the needs list and circling the needs relevant to the conversation.

Practice

This week choose an upcoming decision to negotiate with your partner keeping in mind the principles and strategies above.