

# Say What You Need to Say — to Get What You Really Want

by Kelly Johnson



***Raise your hand if you ask for what you want and need. If not, read on, 'cause your partner can't read your mind.***



*Wouldn't it be nice if our partners could just instinctively know what we wanted and then immediately meet all of our desires? In a world where we get pampered and treated as if all of life revolved around us, why should we waste our time asking for anything?* Imagine this: You're like one of those ancient kings who lounges about while an attentive staff caters to your every whim. You snap your fingers and they just immediately intuit your needs.

Unfortunately, you and I aren't royalty. And chances are, unless you've married a psychic, your partner can't read your mind! Even celebrities, with their entourages of people paid to serve them, still have to do things the hard way when it comes to their relationships.

**That's right — good old-fashioned communication is absolutely required if you're to have any kind of intimate, long-term relationship.** It's not fun, and it's often time-consuming, but there's no way around this Relationship Reality: *If you need something, the only way to get it will be to tell your partner. No one can read your mind.*

## Learn to speak up

I've been asked many times to define the number-one reason why people finally get to the point of separation and divorce. Naturally, there are different reasons for different couples, but it usually comes down to a variation on the same theme: **At some point in time, you or your partner stop verbalizing your wants and needs.** The process is simple: When people have expectations (on any level) that are unmet, they'll most likely become very unhappy. They'll pout, withdraw, get angry, and generally act in unpleasant ways that aren't part of their normal character.

*But why would our partner not meet our expectations? Is it because they've hatched some secret evil plan to make us miserable? Do they like to see us upset and frustrated every day?* In most instances, this is far from the case. The truth is: **We usually don't get our expectations met because our partner just doesn't know what we want.**

Read that sentence again, because this may be one of the most important concepts that I'll offer. **You won't get the things you desire if you don't find a way to express these wishes to your partner.** The way, in and of itself, doesn't matter — tell them, write them a letter, show them, go to the top of the nearest building and shout it with a megaphone — I don't care how you do it, but express your needs!

I'm making a big assumption here — that you recognize the expectations you bring to a relationship, because in order to articulate your needs, you must know what they are first. Yet when I've asked couples over the years what it is that they specifically need, the answer is usually along the lines of, *"I just want to be happy."* This response just isn't sufficient. **If you only have a vague idea of what you want, then you'll only get vague things in return.** I really don't have a clue what "happy" means to you, and your partner probably doesn't intuitively know that either. **So, to get specific things, you must ask for specific things, no matter how small or trivial these things seem.**

## An example

Let's illustrate this point with an example that follows a typical chain of events: John and Laura don't know what the other expects in their relationship. John was raised in a household where his mother did all of the chores for the family. She cooked and cleaned, while John focused on his schoolwork. If John did make a mess — such as tossing his clothes around or not cleaning up after himself — it was no big deal. His mother was always right behind him, cheerfully taking care of his life.

Laura, on the other hand, was raised with the notion that every family member pulled their weight, and she was given a list of duties that she was expected to complete each day. Consequently, she now lives to organize, and a messy house just drives her crazy. Yet, for some reason, she lets John slide on his responsibilities, so he does what he's familiar with — he throws his clothes on the floor, doesn't take out the garbage, and never washes the dishes after dinner. There are many reasons why Laura doesn't express what she needs from John (which I'll get to later), but the end result is that these little irritations start to build up. Laura is upset, but she thinks that maybe she shouldn't turn John's annoying little habits into a huge argument.

So a lot of time passes, with Laura's frustration mounting, and there's no resolution in sight. **She begins to feel that if John really cared about her, he'd recognize this lack of respect and just change on his own. She finally comes to the conclusion that John must not really love her, since he continues to exhibit behavior that she deems intolerable.** See if the following conversation sounds familiar to you.



**Laura:** "I'm so tired of your not doing anything around here! I'm not your mother. Pick up your stuff!"

**John:** "Wait a minute. Why are you getting mad all of a sudden?"

**Laura:** "Because you're a slob! I'm not going to clean up after you anymore."

**John:** (now angry) "Hey, it's the least you could do for me! I work all day long to support this family, and all I get in return is you yelling at me."

**Laura:** "All I'm asking is that you make an effort."

**John:** (defensively) "Well, it never bothered you before."  
(He storms out of the room.)

A few hours later, John can't understand it when he wants to get romantic with Laura and she rejects his advances. Another argument ensues, and they don't even speak to each other the next day.

## Who's at fault?

So who do you think is most at fault here? If you're like most people I've had analyze this interaction, you'll probably blame John more than Laura. You probably think that he's acting like a jerk (you're right), and that he should start to respect his wife by modifying his messy behavior. It may surprise you to learn, however, that I tend to blame Laura. How could this be? After all, a number of mistakes were made by each of them during this heated exchange.

**Mistake #1:** Laura's approach — blaming and ordering. This will only serve to make John defensive and angry. Implying that John is still a child won't serve to express her needs in a way that he'll hear.

**Mistake #2:** John's attempt to distract Laura from his flaws. By referring to how hard he works, he essentially negates her feelings and sends the conversation in an unrelated direction.

**Mistake #3:** But the biggest mistake of all actually occurred long before their angry interaction. When John says, "Well, it never bothered you before," he's right, as far as he'd been led to believe. This is a reasonable

assumption on his part, although you may argue that he should have known that his habits would bother any normal person. Nevertheless, **Laura must shoulder the blame for not ever saying what she needed and expected from John in the relationship.** John was simply doing what he's always done (right or wrong) — it was up to Laura to communicate her displeasure, and she failed to do so. She let a bad pattern establish over the course of the relationship, and then expected a sudden end to her husband's sloppiness. Like most things in life, the longer you let someone get away with something, the harder it will be to quickly change the dynamic.

**So you must get over the feeling that it's selfish to communicate your expectations. In fact, one of the characteristics of someone who's grown up is the ability to respectfully ask their partner to consider their needs.** Children have parents to do things for them, so they aren't forced to express their requirements. But you're not a child anymore, and you can't expect your partner to magically know what you want. Adults define the things that will make them happy, and then develop a plan to achieve the desired result. At the very least, it's naive to believe that your partner will

automatically satisfy all of your wishes without some direction from you.

## The path to getting your needs met

So how do you begin this process? I understand that it's a daunting task to acknowledge your needs in a relationship and then to actually communicate them to another person. Usually the excuse for this procrastination is something like: "He won't do it anyway, so what's the use of asking?" I counter this statement with the challenge that you have absolutely no chance of getting what you want if you don't ask for it. If you're not being fulfilled emotionally or sexually by your partner, then it's time to take action. *What is truly the*





worst thing that could happen if you ask your partner to do some specific thing? With few exceptions, all they can do is say no, and then you know where things stand.

You should be getting the message that at some point you'll have to decide whether to draw that line in the sand and demand that your partner do certain things in order to keep the relationship viable. Neither I nor anyone else can define this for you. My personal opinion of what you need for your own relationship isn't going to help you from day to day. The only thing that counts is what *you* define as *necessary*, and then go about telling your partner what that is.

For instance, Kim decided that she needed her husband to tell her what time he would return home from work each day. She also expected them to eat dinner together every night, since she felt that this was an important time for her to talk to her husband. She told her husband her needs, he agreed, and the relationship flourished. I asked her once what she would have done if he had refused to respect her wishes. Her reply was that this expectation was so crucial to her that she would have considered ending the relationship and finding someone who would acquiesce to her needs.

The same challenge applies to you: **Start defining the things you absolutely need from your partner in several critical areas.** For most people, this centers on issues of commitment and fidelity, sexual relations, family dynamics, children and finances.

### 3 Principles

**Principle #1: The Time to Make Your Needs Known Isn't During the Heat of Battle**

Many people make this error — they let their grievances pile up over time, and then they explode one day over some unrelated matter. The time to talk about your expectations in the relationship is *before* the problem arises. For instance, if you really want children, you should find out if your partner feels the same way before you get married. If you won't tolerate infidelity, then you'd better make this clear early on — before you find out one day that there's been an affair going on behind your back. If you desire a certain amount of romance and sexuality in your relationship, or if you want your partner to do something specific for you, then ask for it. Don't go to bed silently fuming every night.

**Principle #2: Be Aware That Things That Are Extremely Important to You May Not Seem So Important to Your Partner**

I usually forget to turn off the lights when I leave a room, and I don't think it's a big deal, but this bad habit grates on my wife, so she let me know about it. I still don't think it should be that important in the grand scheme of things, but out of respect for her, I now attempt to hit that "off" switch. *Would we end up divorced if I didn't do this?* Probably not, but I try to honor her request nonetheless. By the same token, your partner should try to respect your needs, and you should try to consider theirs. **No matter how crazy the requirement may seem (unless it's destructive or hurtful), mull it over and then try to engage in some sort of dialogue. Neither of you will always get what you want, so be prepared for some negotiation, and don't take a no as a personal rejection.**

**Principle #3: Realize That It Takes a Lot of Guts to Ask for Something, Since the Possibility of Rejection Always Looms Large**

But remember this: **Determining your compatibility with a potential lifemate depends on deciding whether you have common expectations and needs for the relationship.** This is no time to be afraid of what the other person may think of you. Holding in your desires because you're scared of being rejected will only hurt the relationship in the long run. **And years of giving in to all of your partner's needs, while forsaking your own, will only lead to a deep sense of resentment.** If your partner does something that you don't like, summon up the courage to tell them the very first time. If it becomes a pattern, then when you finally do speak up, your words will ring hollow, because you've "taken it" for so long.

So start making these phrases a regular part of your vocabulary, beginning right now: **"I would really like it if you/we could..." or "I really need you to..."**

You can never hope to have a deep, intimate relationship for a lifetime unless you take those first few baby steps. ♡

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