

# How Can I Express My Feelings in a More Gentle (less blaming) Way?



We cannot expect our loved ones to guess what is going on inside our minds. This makes expressing our own feelings in a non-judgmental or blaming way critical to healthy relationships. Blame can be a quick route to arguments and resentment. Here are five tips for how to start expressing yourself with loved ones without blame:

**1. Understand your emotions** – before discussing our feelings with someone else, we must first understand them. Put a name to the emotions that you're feeling. If you find that your main feelings are "mad" or "angry," give yourself time to calm down before you attempt to have a discussion so that you can talk openly without anger with your loved one (Heitler, 2013). Further, think about what changes could improve the situation, from your point of view so that you have a good understanding of what you feel as well as how to start to mend any issues (Vilhauer, 2016).

**2. Pick the right time** – make sure that you both have time to talk, schedule time if you need to, but make sure that you

don't wait too long. We want to talk about things to resolve them, instead of bottling-up our feelings. Addressing problems as they arise, rather than letting them become too big to discuss in one sitting helps us stay focused on one issue at a time, and have open conversations with loved ones (Lisitsa, 2013).

**3. State your feelings and solutions** – emotions are not right or wrong but coping with them is exclusively the responsibility of the person feeling the emotion (Heitler, 2013; Payne, 2017). This means that nobody else can control how we feel individually, so when one person feels blamed by another, it can lead to conflict. To avoid blame, use “I feel...” statements (e.g., “I feel sad” or “I feel lonely”) to own your feelings. Stating our emotions directly in this way, without justification about why we feel that way, can make us feel vulnerable. However, it leaves the door open for loved ones to engage with us and enter into a conversation where both people are active participants. Avoid “You make me feel...” statements which can sound like accusations and lead to defensiveness (Vilhauer, 2016).

**4. Avoid accusations and opinions** – be careful to express what you're really feeling and don't confuse those feelings with your thoughts or opinions. It can often be hard to tell them apart. If you find yourself saying, “I feel that” or “I feel like” what you're about to say is probably an opinion or thought masquerading as an emotion. When we present our opinions as emotions, agreement between people with differing opinions becomes harder to reach and opportunities to have open conversations with loved ones are minimized (Vilhauer, 2016; Bernstein, 2018).

**5. Bring Solutions and Listen** – present your ideas for how to improve the situation. Focusing on solutions and validating both parties' feelings can help people feel less defensive (Vilhauer, 2016). Some solutions will be best created together with open communication. Tell your loved one what you need,

give them an opportunity to express their needs, validate each other's feelings, and work on solutions to meet those needs together. Approach the conversation with the goal of making sure what you are feeling is clearly expressed, and you will be able to talk more openly with your loved one, without blame (Payne, 2017). "Problem-solving together makes negative feelings lift" (Heitler, 2013).

Rather than being afraid of expressing our feelings with loved ones, we can choose to look at these moments as opportunities to increase connection. Starting with gentle and non-blaming strategies, like the ones above, can help us do just that.

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**By Chapel Taylor-Olsen and Ashley Yaughner, PhD**

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# Creating Connections Through Cooking



The connection between cooking at home and health has been explored for many years. Regular at home cooking has been tied to improved psychosocial and physical health. The act of providing good, nourishing food for our bodies helps create a sense of flourishing that is thought to be a necessary behavior to promote health (Farmer & Cotter, 2021; Gordon, 2020). One reason for this association could be that people who cook generally eat fewer calories and more fruits and vegetables which improves their physical health. But there is more to cooking than just a physical benefit. Cooking requires us to learn and use multiple life skills from planning what we will eat, to purchasing the ingredients, to preparing the meal. There is satisfaction in completing the whole circle with food. Also, cooking is a form of self-expression and a way to participate in creativity which can contribute to self-efficacy and mastery (Farmer & Cotter, 2021). Lastly, cooking gives us the ability to bring joy to other people. All human beings have a biological need to eat

food and we generally really enjoy eating! Food is an amazing part of our lives that brings interest and excitement, there are so many flavors and texture combinations. With food there is always something new to try and experience. Cooking, serving food, and eating with others connects people at a basic level despite the diversity of cultures and generations, many individuals report a higher sense of well-being when they have meals with family and loved ones (Farmer & Cotter, 2021).

The benefits connected to cooking are truly amazing and can enhance life, but there is also a benefit for marriage relationships. When we cook, we are providing sustenance for our bodies and connecting to others as we make food and eat with them. When couples cook together it can strengthen relationship skills, provide an emotional connection, and build a better understanding of language and how we communicate with each other (Gordon, 2020). Regular time cooking with a spouse is connected to building a stronger, resilient relationship (Borden, 2018; Gordon, 2020). The act of cooking draws people together because everyone has a biological need to nourish their bodies. How we choose to do that is a very personal experience. When couples cook together, they learn that practice makes perfect, that compromise is needed when deciding flavors and ingredients, and that problem solving and working together is necessary for creating a successful meal ("Cooking & Relationships at Flavorful Fridays.," 2021). These skills translate into other situations in life and give couples the ability to build stronger relationships that sustain them through stress and struggle. Couples that cook together learn to reframe failures as learning experiences, they also learn better ways to communicate, they understand the need to spend time together having fun, and they learn to keep practicing ("Cooking & Relationships at Flavorful Fridays.," 2021)!

Ultimately, relationships take work and preparing food takes work, but eventually the work pays off in delicious food and

amazing experiences together (Borden, 2018; “Cooking & Relationships at Flavorful Fridays.,” 2021).

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By April Litchford, Extension Assistant Professor

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# Establishing Smooth Transitions after Divorce



It can be emotional for children and parents alike when children leave the care and responsibility of one parent to be with the other parent. Establishing a routine for these transitions is beneficial for residential parents, nonresidential parents and children. Although there is no correct way to handle these transitions, good communication about how it will happen can make it easier for everyone. Consider these tips.

- **Select a set pickup and return time.** Having a set time when children are picked up and returned creates continuity for them. It is important that they know what to expect and when. If something unforeseen happens and a parent cannot make the visit or pickup when planned, they should let the children and other parent know as soon as possible.
- **Choose a pickup location.** It may be beneficial to pick children up at a neutral location. This could be daycare, school, a grandparent's house or afterschool activities. This will lower the chances that the children will become caught in the middle of their parent's conflict. It will also help children avoid

saying goodbye and leaving one parent to be with the other.

- **Ease children's feelings of guilt and stress.** Children often feel guilty when they leave a parent. It can be difficult for them to go through repeated separations and reunions. Parents should encourage their children to talk about their feelings. Children need to know from both parents that it is okay to love and see the other parent. It is important that children are not used as spies or messengers between parents.
- **Get to know your children's friends.** Allowing children to invite their friends to their house or to join family activities shows them that their parents are interested and care about who they spend time with.
- **Involve nonresidential parents.** Children need regular contact with their nonresidential parent. Both parents should stay actively involved in their child's life. A positive relationship and regular connection with the nonresidential parent help promote a positive adjustment for the child.
- **Get involved in children's school activities.** Nonresidential parents should make an effort to attend parent-teacher conferences, sporting events and other school activities. This keeps parents involved in their children's lives and lets them know that both parents want to be there for them.
- **Establish regular household routines.** Avoid the "Disneyland parent" syndrome of doing strictly fun activities when the children are visiting. Children need structure and routines. Knowing what to expect when they are at each house will make their transition easier.

By: Shannon Cromwell, Utah State University Extension  
associate professor, [Shannon.cromwell@usu.edu](mailto:Shannon.cromwell@usu.edu)



# Avoid Overscheduling Burnout with Your Child by Creating Opportunities for Downtime



Intentions are good when parents sign up their children for dance, baseball, gymnastics, music lessons, and a host of other activities. Parents want their children to succeed in life and hope that participation in these activities will help them do that. Enriching a child's life is a good thing, however, overscheduling can take a toll on you, your child and your family. Deb Lonzer, M.D., board-certified pediatrician and the Chair of the Department of Community Pediatrics for Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital, stated, "Kids whose time is overly organized don't have time to be kids, and their family doesn't have time to be a family. They typically don't eat well, sleep well, or make friends properly" (Cleveland Clinic, 2018).

A poll conducted by Mental Health America asked youth ages 11-17 what was stressing them out. 61% of them replied that juggling priorities (i.e., school, sports, jobs, clubs, etc.)

was causing them stress (Health Enews, 2017). Another poll showed that 78% of children between the ages of 9 and 13 wished that they had more free time (Health Enews, 2017). One report concluded that, "Parents of school-aged children should assess activity-related stress and the degree to which children perceive they are busy." (Brown, et al., 2011) With this in mind, how can parents best help their children balance scheduled activities with down time?

Alvin Rosenfield, M.D., author of *The Overscheduled Child*, suggests that there is nothing wrong with enrichment activities for children if parents make sure they have enough downtime with no activities. He continues that parents should "weigh the benefits of participation against the cost-time, energy, logistical effort, stress and expense-to-you, your child, and the rest of your family" (Rosenfield, 2001). Dr. Lonzer counsels' parents to discuss the activity options with their child and help them choose their top three activities. Once this decision is made don't vary from it. If, down the road, your child wants to try a different activity, make sure to drop one of the original three. On the other hand, Dr. Rosenfield states that a set number of activities or hours of free time aren't necessary. "Parents should listen to their instincts," he said (Rosenfield, 2001). The bottom line is to choose the method that you and your family can live with. Finding a balance that works for your child is the key to help them avoid burnout. Below are additional suggestions from Dr. Lonzer that will help you provide children with downtime. Giving these tips a try can help you find a healthy balance between overscheduling and downtime.

1. **Keep a written calendar.** Dr. Lonzer suggests writing in "sleep time, down time, mealtime, and family time. The balance of fun organized activities with plenty of down time will help kids see that all of these things are important."
2. **Downtime does not mean screen time.** Make sure all

devices and electronics are powered down and put away. Downtime should allow children to use their own creativity and initiative in filling their down time.

3. **Schedule family time.** Plan on scheduling 20 minutes, five times a week as family time. Then do whatever your family enjoys doing together, i.e., ride bikes, play a board game, read books out loud, etc. Go for a walk, again leaving any technology such as cellphones and earbuds, at home. Talk about what is happening now, ask questions, but leave talk of things they must do for school, or that you must do for work for other times. Help your child learn that to live in the moment is a good thing.
4. **Model a good work-life balance.** Budget your time, pace yourself. Don't procrastinate. Let your kids see what a healthy work-life balance looks like.

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**By Christina Pay, Extension Assistant Professor**

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# Helping Children Manage Their Emotions



Have you ever been in a situation where your child has a meltdown that includes crying, screaming, or lashing out at objects or other people? Often times these behaviors occur when a child is tired, hungry, or frustrated, and isn't able to communicate how they are feeling. It can be really embarrassing, especially when it happens in public.

The good news is that there are things we can do as parents to help them learn how to manage their emotions. The key thing to remember is that once children get to the point that they are experiencing intense emotions, it is very difficult to reason with them. This is why it is best to teach them skills and strategies when they are already calm. This way, when they

start to get upset, you can then remind them to use one of the approaches they already know.

Try the strategies below to help your child learn to stay calm.

- **Parents need to stay calm.** In order for you to help your child manage their emotions, you need to be in control of yourself first. Make sure that you communicate with your words, facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures that you are calm and ready to help them be calm.
- **Identify common triggers.** Try to identify what triggers emotional outbursts in your child so you can prevent them in the first place. Look for things like time of day, people they are around, specific activities they are doing. Make a list of these things and keep track of strategies that seem to work and under what circumstances.
- **Don't reinforce acting out behaviors.** Often times, children will continue to act out or raise the level of their outburst because they have learned that their parents will eventually give in or give up. If children end up getting what they want from acting out, they are being reinforced for this behavior and are likely to continue doing it. Teaching children that outbursts aren't an effective way to get what they want will take patience and consistency on your part.
- **Show empathy.** No matter the age of your child, a little empathy can go a long way. Letting your child know that you know they are going through a hard time is a good way to start the interaction with them because it lets them know you are on their team. Even if what they are upset about seems ridiculous to you, in their mind it can seem like the end of the world. Try saying, "I get why you are upset right now," or "I know you are mad about what just happened."

- **Be specific about the behaviors that are not acceptable.** Instead of saying, “stop acting like a baby,” try being specific by saying something like, “you are screaming and throwing your toys and that is not okay.”
- **Give them some strategies to try and practice with them.** Some simple strategies that help children calm down include counting to five, taking some deep breaths, holding an object such as a toy that they like, and having a calm-down place. Try saying something like, “When you’re mad, instead of screaming and crying, take some deep breaths and count to five.” It also helps for you to actually show them what you want to see them do by doing it with them. For example, “On the count of three, let’s take a deep breath to calm down. Ready, one, two, three...” Remember that negative behavior patterns can take some time to unlearn and that practicing the strategies when they are already calm is best.
- **Allow them time to calm down.** Know when they need time to calm down and remind them to use one of their strategies. For example, say “I’m going to give you five minutes to go to your room and calm down. I’ll check on you in a few minutes to see how you’re doing.” Let them know that the sooner they go to their calm-down place, the sooner you will be able to listen to them.
- **Teach them to use their words.** Once they calm down, try to get them to tell you what made them so upset. The goal is for them to be able to tell you what is bothering them before they have a meltdown. Give them the guidance to use their words to tell you that they are mad or feeling frustrated instead of throwing an object, hurting someone else, or yelling. You can explain that once they tell you that they are upset, you will be able to help them figure out how to deal with it.

You may not be able to prevent all of their meltdowns, but hopefully by using the strategies above, you can help your child learn to manage their emotions and keep their emotional outbursts to a minimum.

For more information, check out these additional resources:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>

<https://extension.psu.edu/programs/betterkidcare/early-care/tip-pages/all/talking-with-preschoolers-about-emotions>

[http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/familytools/teaching\\_emotions.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/familytools/teaching_emotions.pdf)

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By Lisa Schainker, Extension Assistant Professor

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# Building Family Relationships Through Volunteering



Family volunteer projects are a powerful way to build family relationships by accomplishing a common goal together. Family volunteering provides members a way to grow relationships as they learn more about each other, see each other giving service, and have fun together while serving others.

Volunteer projects make memories and build character. Some characteristics built through volunteering include responsibility, self-worth, compassion, tolerance, and sacrifice.

Benefits of volunteering include improved mental and physical health, increased life satisfaction, increased social well-being, and decreased depression (Lawton et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2018). Studies reveal family volunteering leads to increased marital and family satisfaction, improved parenting and conflict resolution, shared experiences and values, and that volunteer projects foster bonding between parents and children (Lewton et al., 2012).

Volunteer opportunities come in many forms. It's important that families find a good fit for their volunteering. Keep the following in mind when searching for a family volunteer project:

- Determine what is realistic in terms of resources of time and money.
- Consider the duration of the project and flexibility in



scheduling.

- Keep in mind the health and talents of family members.
- Decide together on the project. Find a project that is meaningful to family members.
- Remember there are many virtual volunteering projects.

Family volunteer projects often include work, but make sure they also include a fun way to spend time together. As families explore, carry out, and reflect on their volunteer projects they, in turn, build family relationships.

For further resources and help in finding family volunteer projects visit:

<https://userve.utah.gov/family-volunteer/>

<https://www.showuputah.org/service>

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/volunteer.html>

<https://www.justserve.org/>

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By Kari Ure, Extension Assistant Professor

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# Finding Competent and Affordable Childcare



Professors Brower and Davis (2021) recently reviewed the need for parent self-care on USU Extension's Relationship website. They reminded readers that when we experience mental and emotional fatigue, it is hard to provide quality care to our children that show love and support. Obtaining a babysitter to care for your children while you take time to recharge may be necessary. So, how does a caregiver make sure they hire someone who is a good fit for their needs and family? Let's discuss how to find someone you believe to be competent in the care of your child and the affordability of care.

## Finding Competent Providers

- Ask family and friends for referrals. Ask them who they trust and why.

- Take the time to call and talk to referrals from friends and family. What may work for them might not for you.
- Interview care providers. Think about how you would want someone to handle child behaviors or safety concerns. Ask questions based on your desires and concerns.
- If CPR and first aid certification are important to you, verify that the individual has current training and certification. They should have a card confirming what training they received and when it will expire.
- Please note that childcare does not include housekeeping. Informing your chosen caregiver that you expect toys to be put away is advised. However, if you expect more to be done, then an additional fee should be arranged for in advance for those services.
- Take time before you leave home to talk with your children and the sitter about home rules to be followed. That way, everyone is on the same page, and the sitter will have less trouble getting children to follow home rules.

## **Finding Affordable Care**

- Ask friends and family what they pay per hour for babysitting. Consider the number of children you have when calculating what you are willing to pay them.
- Have an open conversation about the cost per hour of care with your babysitter prior to hire. Think about what you can afford; if their price is too high, then be honest with them about what you are willing to pay per hour.
- Ask friends and family members with children if you can do a babysitting swap.
- Talk with those you know and trust about the possibility of watching your child if ever you find you need time for self-care. You can always make a treat and deliver it later as a thank you.
- If you have a child with disabilities, some Utah

counties have programs designed to give parents a few hours of reprieve. See <https://kotm.org/programs/respice-care>

- Here is another resource for those experiencing crisis or feeling overwhelmed. This center will provide respite if you need a break. See <http://www.utahvalleyfamilysupport.org/how-we-can-help/crisis-services/>. Be sure to call ahead if using this resource.

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**By Eva Timothy, Extension Professional Practice Assistant Professor**

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## Cooling Hot Heads



Have you ever been so upset with your partner that you can't think straight? It is normal to have moments of frustration and anger in relationships. How we manage strong emotions in our relationships is what matters. Being filled with uncontrolled, unmanaged anger during an argument is not constructive for you or your partner and can have long-term damaging effects to the relationship. So, what can you do to cool down and reach a point where you can think more clearly and problem solve with your partner?

When you or your partner get to a point where you are feeling overwhelmed or "flooded," it is important to take a break from the situation for at least 20 minutes, about the amount of time that it takes for the parasympathetic anti-stress hormones to put the brakes on runaway emotions (Navarra, 2021). Taking a break can help you to prevent further escalation and possibly saying or doing things that you will regret. Consider creating a signal that you need a break such as a code word. Use this time away from each other to calm yourself and get your mind off the situation by doing something such as:

- Focused breathing: Take ten slow, deep breaths, pausing for one or two seconds after inhaling.
- Positive imagery: Close your eyes and think of a positive, relaxing experience, time or place.
- Get active: Take a short walk to help you decompress, burn off extra tension and reduce stress or, if it works better for you, try non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises to relax your muscles to feel calmer.
- Progressive muscle relaxation: slowly tense then relax each muscle group.
- Listen to calming music.
- Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax" while breathing deeply.

**By Naomi Brower, Extension Professor, & Sophia Pettit, Student Intern**

Once you are both calm enough to have a conversation, make sure you approach each other to try talking again. At some point, it may also be helpful to talk about what may have triggered such intense emotions (such as past experiences/history). While intense feelings and conflict are uncomfortable, with effort, difficult conversations can also lead to increased closeness. For more information see this article:

The positive side of anger in relationships: A door to increasing intimacy.

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Dr. Robert Navarra. <https://drrobertnavarra.com/the-positive-side-of-anger-in-relationships-a-door-to-increasing-intimacy/>

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# The Benefits of Adult Friendships



An old poem tells us to, “Make new friends but keep the old, the new are silver the old are gold” (Parry, n.d.). Researchers are finding that friendships are worth even more than silver or gold, in fact, there are many benefits associated with adult friendships. In a study published by the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, researchers note, “Incorporating social support and connections is critical for overall health and for healthy habits to be sustainable” (Martino, et al, 2017). These same researchers found evidence that social support (e.g., friendships), help people maintain a variety of health factors such as blood sugar control, heart health, a healthy body mass index, cancer survival improvement, and overall mental health improvement. Another study published in The American Journal of Psychiatry, concluded that “social connection is the strongest protective factor for depression”(Choi, et al, 2020). The benefits of friendship also increase your sense of belonging and purpose, contribute to improved self-worth and confidence, help you cope with traumatic events in your life, and increase happiness while reducing stress.

Adults often find it more difficult to develop new friendships

or maintain existing friendships. Responsibilities such as work or taking care of a family may take priority. Additionally, friendships change as people change interests or move away. However, you are never too old, and it is never too late to reach out to old friends or make new friends. Friendship takes effort but given the benefits of friendship, the extra work can be worth it. Following the suggestions below from the Mayo Clinic may help as you seek to nurture new and existing friendships:

**1. Be kind.** This is the core of successful relationships. You get back what you put in so make certain what you give is positive and kind. Try expressing gratitude for the small things, say “thank you” when you are thankful or appreciative of your friend or something kind they did.

**2. Be a good listener.** Let your friend know you are interested in their life. Show interest through eye contact and body language. Try to listen and ask clarifying questions, but don’t seek to respond with advice unless it is asked for directly.

**3. Open up.** Sharing about your life can deepen connection and build intimacy with your friend. It shows them that they hold a special place in your life. Try expressing your feelings with “I” statements to be vulnerable and build connection.

**4. Show that you can be trusted.** Be dependable, reliable, and responsible. When your friends share confidences with you, keep it confidential. Be sure to follow through on commitments and be on time when you plan get together.

**5. Make yourself available.** Forging friendships takes time, including time spent together. Try to see new friends regularly and check in with them in-between times. Try texting or calling your friends when you think about them just to talk and be available to them.



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**By Christina Pay, Extension Assistant Professor**

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# How Do I Know My Partner Will be Faithful?



Trust in a relationship is key to its success. Most people do not automatically trust someone they do not know. They often determine trust by giving a little at the beginning of the relationship, observing behavior, and then giving or rescinding it, based on their perception of the person's behavior. According to "Assessments of Trust in Intimate Relationships and the Self-perception Process," in *The Journal of Social Psychology* (reference below), for intimate partners to progress toward feeling fully secure in the longevity of a relationship, fundamental traits need to be exhibited. Two of those traits are predictability and dependability, which lead to faith in the survival of the relationship.

Predictability means that in any given situation, you have an idea of how your partner will respond. The article suggests that this knowledge is gained by a series of observations and behavioral responses. As a partner follows through with promises, the other person in the relationship can determine

if he or she feels there is consistency in the behavior. Feeling as if we know what to expect is one way to build trust. Conversely, if a partner shows a lack of consistency in what he or she says and does, this can erode the base foundation of a trusting relationship. Once predictability is proven, a couple can move toward establishing dependability.

Dependability in a relationship means you can count on your partner to be reliable and trustworthy. This includes being willing to admit mistakes and always being truthful, including in interactions with others. Saying what you mean and meaning what you say are part of being truthful. However, there may be times when your partner needs to make a change to plans. Their willingness to communicate about the change is imperative.

Our own past experiences can influence how we perceive behaviors. A breach of trust in a past relationship can color the way we interpret behaviors in the present. Open communication about your thoughts and feelings is vital to establishing a trusting relationship.

Use the following questions to explore trust in your intimate relationship.

- Does my partner keep promises?
- Does my partner tell me about needed changes to a plan?
- More often than not, is my partner's behavior in our relationship positive?
- Do I know what to expect from my partner in most situations?
- Do I feel physically, mentally, and emotionally safe with my partner? Why?

If you are still uncertain whether or not you can trust your partner, explore your past experiences and behaviors that

caused you concern, and determine why. Talk with your partner about your concerns. If you do not feel comfortable discussing them, seek out a licensed therapist to help explore your experiences and thoughts.

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By: Eva Timothy, Extension assistant professor, Eva.Timothy@usu.edu, 435-864-1483