

Workshop B – Positive Communication Practices That Build Unity

Sweden Bahá'í Summer School, Friday, July 10, 2026, 14:00-17:00

Instructions: Form groups of 2-4 people. Discuss Sections 1-4. Take a break. Then come back to discuss Sections 5-8.

Section 1: Learning-in-Action Elements (10 minutes)

- Study (spiritual guidance, general information...)
- Consult (build understanding; make unified decisions)
- Action (carry out decisions in unity)
- Reflection (observe and assess throughout action and again at the end)

Discuss: How can being in a “learning-in-action” mindset benefit your marriage and family life?

Section 2: Communication Principles (30-40 minutes)

Instructions: Read all of the following quotations, and then identify the spiritual principles they contain that can guide positive communication.

1. “A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding....” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, #CXXXII)
2. “Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.
“Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. ... It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man’s station.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, #11)
3. “We have forbidden you dissension and conflict in My Books, and My Scriptures, and My Scrolls, and My Tablets, and have wished thereby naught else save your exaltation and advancement.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 135)
4. “O people of God! I admonish you to observe courtesy, for above all else it is the prince of virtues.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, #7)
5. “Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that ‘Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.’” (Universal House of Justice, “Individual Rights and Freedoms”, pp. 12-13)
6. “Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the

significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race. Just as this discipline applies to the spoken word, it applies equally to the written word....” (Universal House of Justice, “Individual Rights and Freedoms”, p. 16)

Discuss: What spiritual principles and virtues can guide communication in your marriage and family? What would help you remember to apply them?

Section 3: Pause If Escalating into Negativity (15 minutes)

Instructions: Read through this section and then discuss the content at the end of the section.

“When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Lights of Guidance*, #587)

It is best to stop consulting when you notice you are no longer listening and participating effectively, or when either of you is getting angry or stressed. Continuing a consultation when you are both upset with each other can be harmful and unproductive. Letting the feelings calm down for 15-20 minutes can make it easier to resume consulting.

Taking a break, or even sleeping overnight, is often beneficial. Taking a break can be an act of kindness, mercy, and gentleness toward one another. If taking a break means one of you will leave your home, please practice respect by letting the other partner know where you are going and how long you will likely be gone. It’s also wise to agree on who will reinstate consultation and when, and then do so without reminders.

After postponing discussion and while taking a break, couples can take time to individually reflect and assess:

- Are our feelings hurt? If so, why?
- Are we either dominating our partner or failing to share important thoughts and feelings?
- Are our egos in the mode of wanting to be “right” about something and insisting on it, rather than striving for unity?

When you come back together, you may choose to be vulnerable and share what emerged from your reflection time. You then create space for true consultation, where you learn, understand, and work together to achieve a unified outcome.

Discuss: When have you found it beneficial to take a break during a consultation? When did you regret that you did not take a break?

Section 4: Warning of Two Negative Communication Patterns (15 minutes)

Instructions: Read through this section, and then discuss the content. Questions are provided to help.

To maintain couple and family unity and well-being, it is essential to avoid character attacks, severe criticism, or harsh language, as these behaviors cause defensiveness, withdrawal, resentment, and

disunity. If these behaviors occur during conversations or consultations, they will interfere with achieving a positive outcome.

Studies by The Gottman Institute on couples have identified some highly damaging behaviors that couples sometimes engage in, along with healthier alternatives. Two of these are listed below:

1. **Criticism:** Negative comments about a partner's personality or an attack on a partner's character; blaming a partner's personality or character for problems in the relationship; example: "You are so irresponsible."

How to fix it: Don't blame; use "I" statements instead of "you" to express your feelings and needs.

2. **Contempt:** Disregard and act superior through body language (examples: eye-rolling, shrugging, turning away...); or using sneering, sarcastic, patronizing, or self-righteous words; for example, "You're such an idiot! Can't you do anything right?"

How to fix it: Hold positive thoughts and feelings and share admiration and appreciation.

Discuss:

1. What harm have you seen from these poor habits?
2. What helps you avoid criticizing someone?
3. What helps you speak for yourself rather than blaming your partner?
4. What benefits do you see when you share positive words with a partner?

*****30-Minute Break*****

Section 5: Affirming the Best in One Another (20 minutes)

Instructions: Read through this section, then complete the activity at the end of the section.

Including a character virtue for specifically and sincerely expressing appreciation to one another and to other people touches hearts, builds character and relationships, and brings happiness. Enjoy enhancing your communications with easy statements that are loving and affirming, such as these:

- Thank you for being [helpful, flexible, truthful...] when you....
- I appreciate your [courage, respect, faithfulness...] when you....
- I love how [accepting, enthusiastic, encouraging...] you are when you...!

Below is an example of more complex statements you might say to someone. The first is a positive statement, like what you may already be comfortable making. The second version uses Virtue Language instead.

Good Statement:

"I'm happy you want to try some new activities with me!"

Better Statement Using Virtue Language:

"I really appreciated how enthusiastic and courageous you were about skiing with me this weekend. I know you haven't had much experience in the mountains, and I'm happy you were willing to try something new with me."

Good Statement:

“Thanks for making breakfast!”

Better Statement Using Character Quality Language:

“Thank you for being thoughtful and caring this morning and for fixing breakfast for both of us before we gardened together. I know you were concerned when I got lightheaded last weekend because I hadn’t eaten first.”

The first statements are positive, and the recipient will likely feel appreciated. However, the second, more powerful and specific statements include acknowledgments of virtues. These show attentiveness and encourage continued practice of the virtues.

Using Virtue Language helps you strengthen and continue practicing these qualities. When someone notices your use of a virtue, it encourages you to keep going. It is often easier to criticize than to see and appreciate what someone does well. Criticizing someone’s character is particularly destructive. It takes practice to consciously look for someone’s positive actions and speak specifically about them, but it is worth the effort and very affirming for everyone involved.

[Note: This is a way parents can help their children develop good character. A helpful resource is *The Family Virtues Guide* by Linda Kavelin Popov.]

Activity: Each person in the group will use Virtue Language and practice saying something positive about a family member.

Section 6: Encouraging Each Other (30 minutes)

Instructions: Read this entire section, and then discuss the questions at the end of it.

1. “We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weakness of others, if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise....” (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #291)
2. “May the Beloved bless your meritorious efforts, guide every step you take in the path of service, and fulfill every hope you cherish for the promotion of His Faith and the consolidation of its God-given institutions, You true and grateful brother, Shoghi” (Shoghi Effendi, *Afire with the Vision*, #193.5)
3. “... [L]ove each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit.” (Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 39)
4. “The word *encourage* means ‘to inspire courage.’ All of us have areas in which we feel insecure. We lack courage, and that lack of courage often hinders us from accomplishing the positive things that we would like to do. The latent potential within your spouse in his or her areas of insecurity may await your encouraging words. (Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, p. 42)
5. “Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from your spouse’s perspective. We must first learn what is important to our spouse. Only then can we give encouragement. With

verbal encouragement, we are trying to communicate, 'I know. I care. I am with you. How can I help?' We are trying to show that we believe in him and in his abilities." (*The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, p. 45)

6. "People form much more positive emotional connections when they encourage one another's dreams and aspirations." (John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and Joan DeClaire, *The Relationship Cure*, p. 209)
7. "Courage comes from the Latin for 'heart' (cor). Courage is also contained in the word *encouragement*—literally, giving heart to another." (Stephen Post, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, p. 105)

Encouragement affirms the other person's humanity and spirit. It shows appreciation for other people's spiritual qualities and acknowledges the beauty of their souls. Encouragement helps people's spiritual roots go deeper and gives them a positive vision of themselves to strive for. It can discourage people if you frown, criticize, show inattentiveness, or use a patronizing attitude. Below are ways to incorporate encouragement into your lives.

Actions That Can Encourage

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|---------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Dwell on the positive | • Affirm choices | • Be loving | qualities or virtues |
| • Smile | • Say thoughtful words; give thoughtful actions | • Be supportive | • Be gentle |
| • List someone's best qualities | • Hug | • Pray together | • Offer to be of service |
| • Accept | • Be enthusiastic | • Be sincere | • Spend time |
| • Open up choices | • Trust | • Praise | • Be genuine; pure motive |
| • Give a gift | • Pay attention | • Be sensitive | • Be honest |
| • Write a note | • Be inclusive | • Be sympathetic | |
| • Acknowledge | • Be patient | • Appreciate use of character | |

The Value of Encouragement

1. Most people want to feel useful and appreciated.
2. It helps people fulfill their potential and improve their lives.
3. When a person hears appreciation for what they are doing, they generally feel good, and in the future, they will try to do better.
4. People are more inclined to take action to develop themselves when others notice their potential and give them the opportunity to develop it.
5. As a result of these new experiences, people develop new capacities. They feel happy, uplifted, and more aware of their potential to contribute to others.

Discuss:

1. What positive outcomes have you observed from sincere encouragement?
2. How could encouragement help build marriages, families, and communities?

Extra Sections to Do If There Is Enough Time

H.A.L.T Tool Before Communicating (15 minutes)

Instructions: Read the entire section, then discuss the questions at the end.

The H.A.L.T. tool prompts couples to practice Compassion, Respect, and Self-Discipline. You can pause or postpone (halt) your communication and address your needs as much as possible, such as these:

- **H:** Are we **Hungry**? – Have something to eat
- **A:** Are we **Angry**? – Take time to calm down and re-center
- **L:** Do we have **Low Energy**? – Recharge with time alone or time with others
- **T:** Are we **Tired**? – Take a rest break or sleep

Taking a H.A.L.T. break during a consultation benefits you if you begin escalating into discord.

A Couple Shares from Experience: “We use H.A.L.T. as one way to proactively avoid conflict. However, we have noticed that when we use it regularly, it can signal a systemic issue we need to address. For example, we noticed that one of us was so constantly tired from a long daily work commute that there was no energy to connect or consult. Issues were postponed so much that resentment and conflict became common. It could not continue that way. We reorganized our lives and children’s schedules so we had a few hours to reflect and consult about the postponed issues and what could improve our patterns. We considered all the options and concerns, and ultimately we decided to move closer to the work location. It was a major upheaval, but the quality of our relationship and family life has significantly improved.”

Discuss:

1. What wisdom is there in this tool?
2. When have you found that doing something like this was helpful?

Responding to Good News (10 minutes)

Instructions: Read the entire section and then discuss the question at the end.

One practice in a couple relationship that builds a strong connection is how you respond to good news from each other, no matter how small or large:

“Research shows that couples who regularly celebrate the good times have higher levels of commitment, intimacy, trust, and relationship satisfaction.” (Tara Parker-Pope, *For Better*, pp. 271-272)

Ways to respond could include showing enthusiasm and genuine interest, asking questions, expressing pride or appreciation, offering a hug, giving a gift, preparing a special meal, or spending quality time together.

Discuss: What are your favorite ways to respond when a partner or family member shares good news?