

Challenges of Interpersonal Relationships

9



moodboard/Thinkstock

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, readers will explore various types of challenges and discord in interpersonal relationships. By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to

- Explain the “dark side” of communication and communication’s role in both helping and hindering relationship discord
- Understand interpersonal conflict, conflict avoidance, and how conflict is managed and resolved
- Compare and contrast the different types of jealousy, deception, and abuse most frequently encountered in interpersonal relationships
- Apply strategies for competent communication during relationship challenges

Introduction

Suppose that you have been assigned a class project that requires you to perform some complicated mathematical calculations and write a paper. You are confident of your ability to write the paper; however, your math skills are poor. You ask your sister for help with the math problems during the coming week. In return, you offer to let her borrow your car for the week while hers is in the shop for repairs. Your sister agrees to the arrangement, and you give her your car keys the following day. During the coming week, you ask her twice to help you with the math problems; each time she tells you that she is busy. Tomorrow is the deadline for the project to be submitted, and your sister says she does not have time today to help you with the math. The two of you begin to argue, and you accuse her of taking advantage of you by using your car all week and not helping you as she promised. You ask that she return your car keys immediately. Your sister becomes upset with you, claiming that her schedule is busy and you just kept asking for her help at inconvenient times.

Every relationship experiences difficulties, whether in the form of conflict, jealousy, deception, and even aggression or abuse, but how the relational partners work together and communicate in the face of these challenges is what will ultimately make or break their relationship. If the partners can talk through the experience and understand each other’s perspective, they can likely manage the challenge successfully and move on. However, if the partners ignore the issue or only deal with it by yelling and being angry at each other, it may be an issue that the relationship cannot overcome. No relationship is perfect, but if the good times outweigh the bad ones and both partners believe that the relationship is worth working on and maintaining, the partners can strive to be satisfied, committed, intimate, and invested. Being able to understand and navigate common relationship difficulties is instrumental for the successful continuation of any close relationship, and it is thus the focus of this chapter.

Chapter 9 explores challenges and discord that can arise in different types of interpersonal relationships. The discussions address the “dark side” of interpersonal communication, and how communication can both contribute to and assist in tackling the challenges that relational partners face. We discuss the specific challenges of conflict, jealousy, lying, and deception, as well as verbal and online abuse, and we conclude the chapter with suggested strategies for competent communication when challenges arise in relationships.

9.1 The “Dark Side” of Interpersonal Communication

The phrase “dark side” was in large part popularized when the movie *Star Wars*, now *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, was released in 1977. In this film Darth Vader tries to entice Luke Skywalker to reject the way of the good and instead join the “dark side.” Turning or going over to the dark side means you have let your evil side take over, and in doing so you give up on the good or benevolent forces that may have previously guided you. The phrase now has an iconic role in American popular culture, and it generally refers to an evil, malevolent component of something.

The phrase “dark side” is also used in reference to how we behave in our interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal communication researchers William Cupach and Brian Spitzberg (1994) published a book called *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*, in which they exclusively focused on the malevolent forces that can influence interactions and relationships. In this volume, they initially defined the **dark side of interpersonal communication** as interactions

that are challenging, difficult, distressing, and problematic. Dark side messages also involve “dysfunctional, distorted, distressing, and destructive aspects of human action” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998, p. xiv). Cupach and Spitzberg (1994) began to study the dark side of communication in order to balance the scholarly understanding of how we positively relate to each other—through self-disclosure and by showing love, cooperation, and empathy—with the negative, destructive aspects of relationships. Such a balance between bright and dark allows for a more comprehensive consideration of how relationships—and the communication that sustains them—truly function. Research on conflict, jealousy, deception, stalking, hurt, anger, infidelity, and verbal and physical abuse grew exponentially after Spitzberg and Cupach’s initial studies, and with this research, our understanding of the dark side of communication developed as well.

But before we delve into some of the most common challenges that are faced by relational partners, it is important to point out that no message is purely dark, just as no message is entirely bright. There can be negative aspects to qualities or messages that we generally view as positive. For example, as we explained in Chapter 7, being entirely honest and open with your partner could hurt his or her feelings or expose you to vulnerability or violations of your privacy. In addition, relying on humor and jokes, especially ones that are sarcastic or pointed, can prevent your partner from truly knowing who you are. As we saw in Chapter 8, extending social support to another can backfire and make things worse if the person in need does not view it as being helpful or sees it as a form of oversupport.



Hemera Technologies/AbleStock.com/Thinkstock

▲ Some “dark messages” are not wholly destructive and can sometimes be useful or valuable. Anger, if expressed in a manner that isn’t harmful, can help partners confront and work through relationship challenges.

In the same way, “dark messages” do not always have to be entirely destructive and can sometimes be useful or valuable. Being jealous and expressing that jealousy is often viewed as a sign of weakness, but it can also be a signal to your partner that you care about the person or find him or her appealing and attractive. A relationship in which interpersonal conflict is entirely absent may seem calm and tranquil on the surface, but there are likely at least a few upsetting and troublesome issues beneath that surface that are not being addressed. Expressing anger, if done in a manner that does not hurt anyone psychologically or physically, can help both partners realize that the issue is an important one and that frustration has risen to a level that is no longer sustainable.

Although communication can be dark, it can also be an essential way to confront relationship difficulties and challenges. The context, situation, and nature of the relationship between the partners determine whether messages are viewed as helpful or harmful. But what is the impact of the dark side of interpersonal communication? In a comprehensive review of research on the impact of good versus bad events on individuals, psychologist Roy Baumeister and his colleagues determined that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001, p. 323). Specifically, negative life events, interactions, and emotions are perceived and understood more clearly, are more easily recalled, and have more enduring, intense consequences for individuals than do positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Research has also shown, time and again, that the more often romantic couples grapple with dark issues such as conflict, jealousy, infidelity, and abuse, the lower their satisfaction with the relationship. In fact, engaging in negative marital interactions was a stronger predictor of relationship dissatisfaction than being positive toward each other (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Based on this and other findings, psychologist and relationship researcher John Gottman (1994b) proposed that the ratio of positive to negative interactions in a romantic relationship should be 5 to 1 for that relationship to succeed. This 5 to 1 positive to negative message ratio is powerful evidence of just how important dark side messages can be in close relationships.

9.2 Relationship Challenges

When you first form a relationship with another person, whether it is romantic or nonromantic, the relationship tends to be harmonious. When a relationship is in its infancy, both people are usually cautious about what they tell each other and how they say it, and they make a conscious and concerted effort to present positive information about themselves and to avoid conflict. Researchers have found that one of the reasons a new relationship is usually so pleasant and friendly is that, at this stage, people emphasize the similarities they have and ignore their differences (Brown & Rogers, 1991).

However, as a relationship progresses the differences between people emerge. When these differences are small or judged to be insignificant by both parties, they can be easily ignored. Insignificant issues are still worth discussing. Having a partner who squeezes the toothpaste in the middle of the tube, when you prefer that it be squeezed from the bottom, can be extremely annoying. Leaving the milk out on the counter to sour instead of putting it back in the refrigerator can be financially wasteful as well as maddening to others. These minor issues can be bothersome, while other relationship challenges can be quite significant, such as engaging in infidelity or physical or psychological abuse. In fact, there are so many examples of negative communication behaviors that Cupach and Spitzberg, still the research leaders in this area of interpersonal communication, have edited five separate books devoted solely to dark side behaviors and messages in relationships. The following sections will focus on four of the most prevalent and frequently problematic relationship challenges that individuals typically encounter: (1) conflict and conflict avoidance, (2) jealousy, (3) deception, and (4) verbal and online abuse.

Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Avoidance

Probably the most frequent relationship challenges that you face are conflicts in your personal and professional life. The ability to identify and competently manage conflict will improve the quality of your relationships and make relationships more satisfying for you and your partner. Conflict goes beyond disagreements about how to accomplish a task or decisions between two alternative courses of action. When conflict erupts, emotions are often involved, and the relationship can be threatened if the conflict is not managed or resolved amicably.

The following definition, offered by conflict researchers William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker (2013), is used often and will help you recognize when you are dealing with a conflict. Wilmot and Hocker (2013) note that the following items must be present for a **conflict** to exist:

1. There is an expressed struggle, meaning that one or both parties must communicate about the conflict in some verbal or nonverbal manner.

2. There are at least two interdependent parties; the individuals involved need one another in some way, and their choices affect one another.
3. The perception of these parties is that (a) they have incompatible goals, where they both want different things, or even want the same thing, such as a promotion, but cannot both have it; (b) they have scarce resources, such that there is not enough of something—money, time, or even love—to go around; and (c) they have interference from others in achieving their goals, where the presence of the other party is perceived to get in the way of how an individual wants to act or what that individual seeks to have.

Let's look at the separate components of this definition in relation to the situation presented at the beginning of the chapter. This example exhibits all the components of Wilmot and Hocker's (2013) definition of conflict. You and your sister

- Openly and directly communicate your feelings and frustrations to each other about this conflict.
- Depend upon and need something from each other.
- Possess different goals, because you want your sister's help in exchange for lending her your car, but she has been unwilling to assist you.
- There is not enough time or access to the car that can be divided up between you and your sister.
- You each view the other as getting in the way of what you each ultimately want.

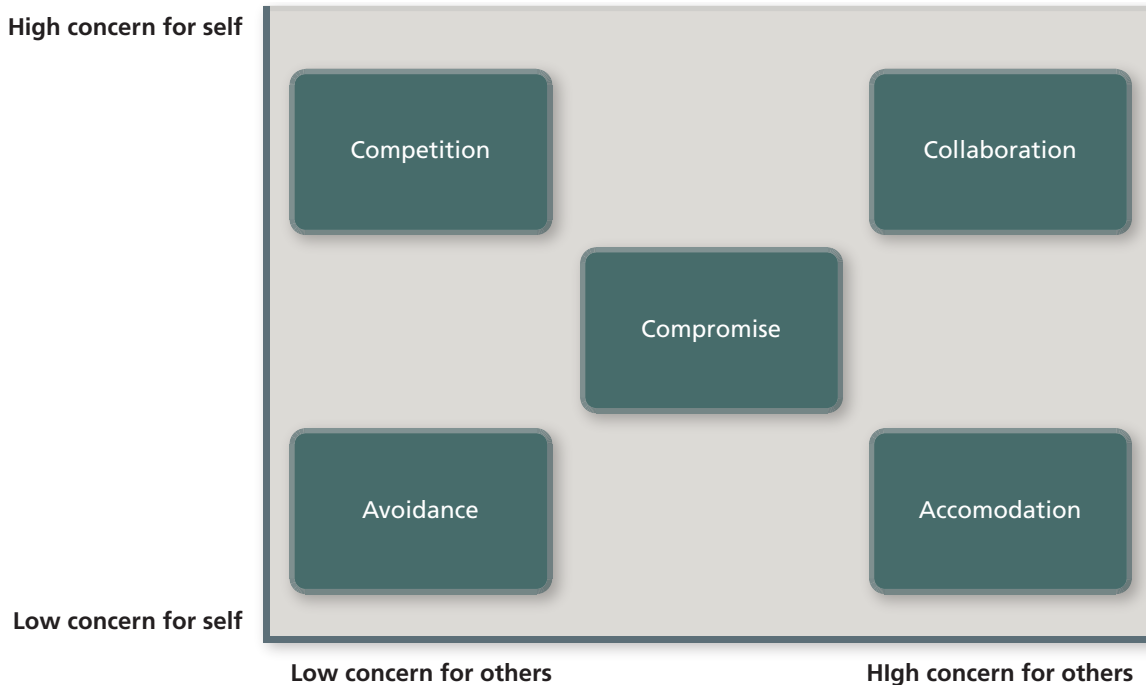
Conflicts such as the one in this hypothetical situation can worsen over time, potentially even permanently damaging a relationship if they are not successfully managed or resolved. Interpersonal conflict can end marriages, separate friends, shatter families, and increase job dissatisfaction and turnover. It can also be painful and damaging to other people who are not directly involved in the conflict. If the conflict occurs in a family, for example, it can negatively affect children and other family members and can impact relationships with one another as well as with the parties who are involved in the conflict. In fact, children can also learn their parents' conflict patterns and go on to use them in their own romantic relationships later in life (e.g., Koerner, 2014). Your ability to competently manage and resolve conflict can thus help you face this relationship challenge and preserve your important relationships.

Conflict Styles

One of the most important things to understand about conflict is the communication style that individuals use. Management professor M. Afzalur Rahim (1983) identified five basic styles that individuals tend to use in their conflicts. These **conflict styles** are defined as patterned behavioral responses that individuals use across different conflicts and with different people. Though Rahim originally developed this conflict style typology for the organizational context, it is now also widely used by scholars who are interested in conflicts in close relationships. These five styles can be understood by looking at the various combinations of two related dimensions: (1) how concerned you are about yourself and what you seek to get out of the conflict, and (2) how concerned you are about the other person and assisting the other in getting what he or she wants. See Figure 9.1 to understand how these two dimensions combine to create each individual style.

Figure 9.1: Conflict styles organized by dimension

Each of the five conflict styles considers the individual's degree of concern for self versus his or her degree of concern for the other person.



Source: Adapted from Rahim, M. A. (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26(2), 368–376.

The first conflict style is **avoidance**, which occurs when there is a low concern for yourself and a low concern for the other party. When our style is to avoid conflict, we believe that if we just ignore an issue, it will go away. If your sister prefers the avoidance style during the conflict example we introduced at the beginning of the chapter, she would likely communicate by being evasive, denying that the conflict exists, changing the topic, using humor to deflect the conflict, or physically or emotionally withdrawing from interacting with you. Withdrawal, by itself, is not always negative; sometimes it is good to get away from the other person to get your emotions under control or to think about the issue before you discuss it. However, researchers found that in failing marriages negative emotions overwhelm the interaction between the parties, who then withdraw from each other (Zautra, 2003). The goal should not be to always avoid conflict, but to strategically use the avoidance style to manage conflict in a useful way.

In the second style, **accommodation**, there is a low concern for yourself, but a high concern for the other person. In other words, you are more interested in giving in to what the other party wants than you are about accomplishing your own goals. An accommodating person tends to give in to the demands of other people and accepts being “put upon” by others. If you used this conflict style with your sister, you would communicate by tending to speak softly and often being reluctant to express your opinion. You may also look down and avoid eye contact with your sister. Those with an accommodating conflict style have a body posture that is often closed, with their arms drawn inward, and they rarely use gestures to punctuate their speech (Hartley, 1999).

The third style, **competition**, involves a high concern for yourself and a low concern for the other party in the conflict. A competitive style is evident when an individual engages in aggressive or competitive behavior by being critical, having a win-lose orientation, and engaging in direct confrontation. Imagine both you and your sister are competitive in your conflict. You may communicate using this style by speaking at a high or low pitch and having a demanding tone of voice. Your sister may be forceful or invasive in her communication and may try to intimidate you (Arredondo, 2000). For you and your sister, the goal is winning, and you each may interrupt, talk loudly, stare, or even be abusive in your communication. Those who use the competition conflict style also run the risk of inviting an even more aggressive response to their statements, which can result in escalating disagreements and conflicts (Hartley, 1999).

The fourth conflict style is **compromise**, in which there is a moderate concern both for yourself and for the other person. Compromising in conflict involves some gains and some losses for both parties. The individuals in the conflict work together to create a fair solution that is acceptable for both of them, but that also means that no one gets entirely what he or she wants. After you and your sister both cool down a bit, you might try to compromise by negotiating back and forth, suggesting trade-offs, and prioritizing what one wants the most versus what is more easily given up. This may mean that your sister drops everything to help you complete your assignment on time and that you will not ask her to wash your car or refill it with gas. In formal conflict mediation situations, many agreements are compromises—both parties formally agree to give up something in exchange for something else.

When you have a high concern for yourself and a high concern for the other person, you will most likely use the final style, **collaboration**. When using this style, an individual is attempting to create a win-win situation for both parties—one where both parties feel fully satisfied and support the decision or solution that they have reached. As opposed to the compromise strategy, where both parties have some gains and some losses, collaboration involves both parties achieving all that they originally sought and being satisfied with the outcome. Because both parties must be satisfied in this conflict style, it is the most challenging and demanding style that you can use. To collaborate in our conflict example, you and your sister might make statements that disclose and describe your thoughts and feelings and seek similar information from each other. The collaborative individual will also be supportive about what the other party says and may nonverbally communicate openness by nodding, making eye contact, facing the other person, and shifting his or her body posture so that it is open (for example, not sitting with your arms crossed).

Overall, these conflict styles are fairly enduring patterns that individuals tend to prefer using in their conflicts. However, sometimes you might change your style. A particular person, topic, or situation could mean that you try out a different style. Specifically, because using these conflict styles involves two individuals interacting with each other, the other party in the conflict can affect which conflict style you use. For example, if you usually prefer to talk things out in conflicts by compromising or collaborating, but your sister is always extremely competitive, you may choose to instead use the avoidance style with her because her style preference offers little opportunity to accomplish anything productive when you are in conflict with her. The *Self-Test* feature will allow you to determine your preferred conflict style or styles.

SELF-TEST

Identify Your Conflict Styles

This self-assessment is designed to help you identify your preferred conflict management style. Read each of the statements below and circle the response that you believe best reflects your position regarding each statement. Then use the scoring key to calculate your results for each conflict management style.

When I have a conflict, I do the following:	Not at All				Very Much
1. I give in to the wishes of the other party.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I try to realize a middle-of-the-road solution.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I push my own point of view.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I examine issues until I find a solution that really satisfies me and the other party.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I avoid confrontation about our differences.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I concur with the other party.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I emphasize that we have to find a compromise solution.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I search for gains.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I stand for my own and others' goals and interests.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I avoid differences of opinion as much as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I try to accommodate the other party.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I insist we both give in a little.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I fight for a good outcome for myself.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I examine ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I try to make differences less severe.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I adapt to the other party's goals and interests.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I strive whenever possible towards 50-50 compromise.	1	2	3	4	5

(continued)

When I have a conflict, I do the following:	Not at All				Very Much
18. I do everything to win.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I work out a solution that serves my own as well as others' interests as much as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I try to avoid a confrontation with the other.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring

Write the number circled for each item on the appropriate line below (statement number is under the line), and add up each subscale.

Dimension	Calculation	Your Score
Accommodating (yielding)	_____ + _____ + _____ + _____ = Item 1 Item 6 Item 11 Item 16	
Compromising	_____ + _____ + _____ + _____ = Item 2 Item 7 Item 12 Item 17	
Competing (forcing)	_____ + _____ + _____ + _____ = Item 3 Item 8 Item 13 Item 18	
Collaborating (problem solving)	_____ + _____ + _____ + _____ = Item 4 Item 9 Item 14 Item 19	
Avoiding	_____ + _____ + _____ + _____ = Item 5 Item 10 Item 15 Item 20	

Source: Self-test from de Dreu, C. K. W., Evers, A., Beersma, B., Kluwer, E. S., & Nauta, A. (2001). A theory-based measure of conflict management strategies in the workplace. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 22, 645–668. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Consider Your Results

The higher your score, the more likely you are to use that particular conflict style. You might have scored highest on more than one style. If so, this means that you tend to use both styles when in conflict. Ask your close relationship partners to take this self-test and then compare your responses. Seeing how your conflict styles mesh with or are different from others can give you both insights into how you can more competently face the relationship challenge of conflict. Now consider the following questions.

1. Compare your conflict style with the conflict style of your closest friend or relationship partner. Do you tend to avoid conflict while the other person is more competitive? Are you, for example, an accommodator and the other person a compromiser?
2. Now compare and contrast your role in these different relationships. Do you tend to use different conflict styles with your friend than you do with your relationship partner? What about with a coworker?
3. Were you surprised by your dominant conflict style (or styles)? What information from this chapter could assist you in engaging in conflict more competently?

Management versus Resolution of Conflict

We often focus on what the outcome of a conflict will (or should) be, rather than on the process of engaging in the conflict, from beginning to end. This focus on conflict outcomes also means that we emphasize the importance of **conflict resolution**. Three conditions must exist for a conflict to be resolved:

- The parties in the conflict decide to end the conflict.
- The parties are both satisfied with the outcome of the conflict.
- The parties do not engage in or deal with the conflict again.

How many conflicts can you think of where all three of these conditions have been met? It is unlikely that you have many conflicts with others that have truly been resolved. Resolution is especially hard to accomplish when the conflict is about an important or complicated issue, such as where a couple will move, or when the issue is sensitive, such as when siblings are deciding where their elderly parents should live and who will take care of them if they fall ill. Although resolution is a worthy goal, it is often unrealistic in our experiences of conflict.

Instead of resolution, most of our conflicts are dealt with via management. As we discussed in terms of positive relationship behaviors, the *conflict management* outcome means that the parties have dealt with the conflict for the time being, but one or both individuals remains dissatisfied. This means that there is a strong likelihood that the issue will come up again and that the parties will engage in future interactions regarding the issue. Conflict management is a much more likely outcome if there is a specific conflict interaction. For example, Samuel Vuchinich (1990) found that 66% of family conflicts that occurred at the dinner table ended when the parties agreed to disagree, and 2% ended when one party left the table or refused to continue the conflict. In a different study, 79% of participants in a study of workplace conflict reported that their conflicts ended without resolution (Gayle & Preiss, 1998). And in romantic relationships, the couples' relationship satisfaction decreased as more conflicts went unresolved (Cramer, 2002).

When an issue is managed rather than resolved, there is a much greater chance that it will re-emerge later, and that the parties will have continued conflict about it. This is referred to as a **serial argument**, where a conflict about a particular topic or issue recurs over time and without resolution (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Having a serial argument with a romantic partner can be a stressful experience (Reznik, Roloff, & Miller, 2012) and can harm the relationship (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Although management is the most likely conflict outcome, it can be problematic when conflicts become serial arguments. This may be why, compared to nonserial arguments, romantic partners in serial arguments were more likely to use collaborative communication and less likely to use avoidant or competitive communication (Bevan & Love, 2013). Serial arguers may communicate more constructively because of conscious attempts to reach a resolution.

Overall, conflict can be dangerous because it has a tendency to grow and worsen, particularly when it goes unresolved. But it is also important to remember that conflict can have important benefits that can strengthen a relationship and might even be desirable. For example, in their studies of marriage interaction, Patricia Noller and Judith Feeney (2002) reported that some conflict may actually be good for a marriage over time and can lead to the personal growth of both parties—as long as negative communication is aimed at the other person's specific behavior and not at the whole person. For example, stating to your spouse "I'm upset because you did not take out the trash" should not be threatening to the other person's self-image, self-esteem, or to the relationship. In contrast, stating "Not taking out the trash is just one more indication of your general laziness" is likely to be harmful. The second statement is a form of criticism that

John Gottman, a prominent relationship researcher, cautions can be damaging to the relationship because it is a broad generalization that threatens your spouse's self-esteem. (See *Everyday Communication Challenges* to read more about Gottman's research.) The first example is much more specific and less likely to indict the partner's sense of self. Thus, although conflict is a common dark side of interpersonal communication, it is not entirely negative.

EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Grappling with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Psychology professor John Gottman is currently one of the most influential researchers in the study of marital conflict. His studies, which involve long-term, in-depth observations of how spouses engage in conflict with each other, have spanned decades. From these data Gottman (1994a) created what he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which are four specific behaviors that, when spouses consistently use them in their conflicts with each other, are particularly damaging to the quality of their marriage. In fact, according to Gottman's (1994a) findings, the more that spouses use these messages in conflict, the more likely they are to get divorced. These four behaviors discussed in Gottman's (1994a) research are

- **Criticizing:** Attacking your partner's personality or character, rather than pointing out a specific behavior that you do not like. The intent of criticism is to always be right and for your partner to always be wrong. Criticizing statements usually start with "You always . . .," "You never . . .," and "Why are you so . . ."
- **Contempt:** Attacking your partner's sense of self in order to feel superior or better than your partner. Contempt can actually be viewed as a mild form of psychological abuse. Examples of contempt include insults, calling your partner names, consistently being sarcastic, and sneering. One way to communicate contempt—eye rolling—is particularly hurtful to your partner because it shows blatant disregard for what he or she is saying.
- **Defensiveness:** Depicting or seeing yourself as a victim. Being defensive involves warding off a perceived attack from your partner and is thus a very self-focused, selfish way to communicate. Examples of defensive messages are making excuses, whining, and saying "Yes, but . . ."
- **Stonewalling:** Withdrawing so that you can avoid conflict. Often stonewalling is intended to be a neutral message, such as when you want to take a little while to cool down or think about the situation, but your partner may perceive stonewalling as a sign of disapproval, disconnection, or distancing. Examples of stonewalling include being silent or giving the silent treatment, responding with monosyllables or grunts, and physically leaving.

Many of us use these messages without knowing the potential damage they could cause to our partners and even to our relationships. These actions, though small, cause a great amount of pain and resentment and can build up over time. Try to be conscious of your use of these behaviors with those you care about. If you find that you do use them in conflict, try to stop. Better yet, discuss these actions with those with whom you have conflict and mutually agree to try to not use them in conflict situations.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Do you use any of these messages in your conflicts with your spouse or romantic partner? Do you use these messages in other relationships?
2. What alternative messages can you use in your conflicts with those to whom you are close? How can you strive to enact these alternative messages when engaged in conflict?
3. Which of these four messages do you believe are most damaging to close relationships? Why?

Jealousy

When was the last time you were jealous? Did you see your romantic partner flirting with someone else? Did you notice that your friends seemed to be spending time together without you? Any of these situations can incite **jealousy**, which encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses associated with an individual's need to protect a relationship that is threatened by a third party (Bevan, 2013). In important interpersonal relationships, you experience jealousy when you believe that someone else—called a rival by jealousy researchers—enters the picture, potentially disrupting the partnership that you so value. Jealousy, in this way, can alert you to relationship threats and prompt you to protect the relationship from rivals. Jealousy is different from **envy**, which involves the desire to possess something that you do not already own, such as a car or even an interpersonal quality such as friendliness. In contrast, jealousy is exclusively focused on preserving the relationships that we already have and cherish.

Jealousy has been observed in many different types of close relationships. Many scholars believe that everyone experiences jealousy, that it is an interpersonal experience that spans cultures and societies (White & Mullen, 1989). We may initially associate jealousy with our romantic relationships—and romantic jealousy is indeed the most prevalent and most intense jealousy that individuals can experience—but we can also experience jealousy in close friend, family, and organizational relationships. Jealousy can even be experienced in online settings. In essence, any relationship that is important to us, and that we wish to preserve, can create feelings of jealousy.

Though jealousy is fairly ubiquitous and has the generally innocuous goal of relationship preservation, its experience and expression can also have a dark side. For example, jealousy is a frequent source of conflict in romantic relationships (Strachan & Dutton, 1992). As the major relationship problem in 10–13% of marriages, jealousy is also the fourth most common contributor to divorce in the United States (Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Rogers, 1997). Further, marital and family therapists report that jealousy is a minor issue for two-thirds of their clients and a major issue for another one-quarter of their clients (White, 2008). Therapists view jealousy as an issue that is difficult to treat, as well as one that can be particularly damaging to their clients' relationships (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). In addition, jealousy is frequently a motivating factor for individuals who stalk a former romantic partner (Roberts, 2005). Perhaps most troubling is that across many different studies and samples, jealousy is often found to be a direct motivator for physical or psychological violence. For example, in one study, 15% of participants reported that their partners expressed their jealousy by being physically violent (Mullen & Martin, 1994).

It is clear from these statistics that understanding how to better manage the experience and expression of jealousy is important for mitigating the potential damage of this specific relationship challenge. The following sections will thus discuss how we experience and express jealousy, as well as the emerging issue of experiencing and expressing jealousy online.

Emotional and Cognitive Jealousy

Think again about a time when you felt jealous. How did you feel physically and emotionally? What type of thoughts preoccupied you? It is likely that you recall a mostly unpleasant experience—one where you felt angry and maybe sad and frustrated. Perhaps your heart started beating fast or your stomach began to hurt. Maybe your thoughts and worries consumed a great deal of your focus. These reactions to jealousy are clearly complex, and they are all a part of the **jealousy experience**, which is the combination of emotional and cognitive responses to jealousy. Because it is made up of your thoughts and feelings, the experience of jealousy is internal, which means that others may not know that you are jealous because you do not show any obvious outward

signs. Furthermore, the experience of jealousy can be further separated into emotional and cognitive jealousy.

Emotional jealousy is a blend of feelings that are related to jealousy. Many different emotions are part of this experience, including feeling upset, frustrated, sad, angry, hostile, irritated, disgusted, guilty, envious, fearful, or insecure. Of these, researchers have found that anger, which is a broad emotion that also includes the emotions of hostility and irritation, is most closely associated with the jealousy experience (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). Though most of these emotions are negative and are generally ones that people do not enjoy feeling, the experience can also include positive emotions such as love and passion (White & Mullen, 1989). Indeed, emotional jealousy is associated with experiencing greater love for a romantic partner (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Because there are so many different emotions related to jealousy, every emotional jealousy experience is slightly different. One person may feel scared and sad about the possibility of losing the partner to a rival, whereas another person may instead feel angry and frustrated. Overall, emotional jealousy includes more than one feeling, and it is this aspect that differentiates emotional jealousy from cognitive jealousy.



Digital Vision/Photodisc/Thinkstock

▲ The experience of jealousy is internal to you—there may be no obvious outward signs. Both cognitive jealousy and emotional jealousy are part of the experience.

Cognitive jealousy, the second aspect of the jealousy experience, identifies thoughts experienced during the jealousy situation. Many different thoughts are associated with jealousy. For example, you might be worried that you will lose your friend or romantic partner to a rival. You might also be suspicious about the relationship between the rival and your partner. It is also possible that you are cognitively fixated on the entire jealousy situation. Though cognitive jealousy can allow a jealous person to step back and thoughtfully appraise the situation, research has also found that cognitive jealousy is a more negative experience than emotional jealousy, especially when jealous thoughts spin out of control. For example, research shows positive links between emotional jealousy and love, but the more cognitive jealousy a person experienced, the less love they felt toward their romantic partner (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). When you are jealous, it is best to avoid thinking too much about the jealousy situation. Rather than cognitively dwell on the situation, decide to express your jealousy, an approach that we discuss in the next section.

Behavioral and Communicative Jealousy

As we noted above, the jealousy experience primarily involves your internal thoughts and feelings. Therefore, it is possible that no one else will know that you are jealous. Your jealousy only becomes external when you behave jealously or express your feelings via communication. You can communicate your jealousy to your partner, to the rival, to another friend, to a relative, or even act out your jealousy when you are alone. **Jealousy expression** is the action or communication that results from the jealousy experience. Jealousy expression is the most important part of the jealousy process (Bevan, 2013). According to communication researcher Laura Guerrero (1998), these actions can occur in private, they can be expressed spontaneously, and the communication can be strategically directed toward others. For example, jealousy expression can let

the rival know that he or she should not fraternize with your partner, but it should be used with caution because it can also spur responses from the partner and the rival and can change the relationship.

There are many different forms of jealousy expression. Think once again about the last time that you were jealous. How did you express or communicate your jealousy? Did you discuss it with your partner or confront the rival? Did you try to hide your jealousy from your partner by avoiding him or her? Or did you privately cry or throw something at the wall? These examples illustrate the range of messages and behaviors associated with jealousy expression. **Interactive jealousy messages** are attempts to avoid or engage in communication with your partner about your jealousy. **General jealousy behaviors** are actions that do not directly involve interacting with your partner (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995). Jealousy behaviors can involve contacting the rival or keeping tabs on your partner without the partner's knowledge. Guerrero has been instrumental in increasing our understanding of how jealousy is expressed. Not only did she and her colleagues differentiate between interactive and general behavioral jealousy expression, but she also developed a list of 11 specific ways that jealousy can be expressed (Guerrero, Hannawa, & Babin, 2011). This list, presented in Table 9.1, illustrates the complexity of how we communicate our jealousy.

Table 9.1: The 11 forms of jealousy expression

Jealousy Expression	Definition	Examples
Integrative communication	Direct and constructive messages	Discussing, explaining, sharing jealous feelings
Compensatory restoration	Behaviors to make an individual more attractive or appealing to the partner	Increasing affection, spending more time with the partner
Negative communication	Direct and indirect aggressive messages	Acting rudely, yelling, making mean comments
Rival contact	Direct interaction with the rival about the partner	Confronting or talking to the rival
Derogating the rival	Negative comments about the rival	Calling the rival names, telling the partner that the rival is no good
Violent communication	Threats or actual harm to the partner	Being physically violent, throwing or hitting objects
Surveillance	Actions taken to monitor the partner	Checking up on the partner, looking through the partner's belongings
Signs of possession	Public gestures to confirm that the partner is taken	Showing the partner affection when around a rival
Silence	Decision to not mention the jealousy	Becoming silent, no longer talking
Denials	Decision to ignore the jealousy	Pretending that nothing is wrong, denying feelings of jealousy

Source: Adapted from Guerrero, L. K., Hannawa, A. F., & Babin, E. A. (2011). The Communicative Responses to Jealousy Scale: Revision, empirical validation, and associations with relational satisfaction. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 5, 223–249. Published by Taylor & Francis. Copyright © 2011 Routledge. Used with permission.

How can we communicate our jealousy in a way that will help us achieve the outcomes that we desire? Across studies, integrative communication is the most frequently reported way to express jealousy (Bevan, 2013). Generally, it is a good idea to express your jealousy by way of integrative

communication because it allows you to directly express jealousy in a positive, nonaccusatory way. Integrative jealousy expression is associated with increased relationship satisfaction in a number of research studies (e.g., Bevan, 2008), which is evidence that expressing jealousy in this way can actually be beneficial to relationships. In sharp contrast, using negative or violent communication to express jealousy can threaten the stability of the relationship and, more significantly, can be harmful for the individuals involved; these jealousy expressions can physically or psychologically hurt the partner. When you next encounter a jealousy situation, be sure that your method of jealousy expression is appropriate for the situation and is not harmful to yourself or your partner.

Online Jealousy and Surveillance

The Internet is a relatively new arena for jealousy experiences and expressions. For example, information accessed through Facebook might often incite jealousy among users because the site “provides people with a visible interpersonal forum in which the information shared between Facebook friends can be ambiguous and perceived by a relationship partner as threatening” (Elphinston & Noller, 2011, p. 632). Based on an analysis of research about jealousy expressed and experienced online, Jennifer Bevan (2013) identifies three unique characteristics of online social networking that make such sites an ideal environment for jealousy to spark and grow:

- There is a centralized, public (at least to one’s approved list of other users), and permanent place for observing how a partner interacts with others.
- Information that is posted or included about a partner could easily be misinterpreted because there is a lack of context and a high amount of ambiguity on social networking sites.
- It is easy and convenient to be friends with or somehow linked to individuals, such as former romantic partners, who could be rivals or who could incite jealousy in others.

For example, 75% of social networking users in one study said they were likely to send a Facebook friend request to a former romantic or sexual partner (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009).

How do we become jealous and express jealousy online? Imagine the following situation: Justin and Clara used to date, but broke up two years ago. Clara is now dating Jack. Justin came across Clara’s Facebook profile and sent her a friend request, which she accepted. Once Clara and Justin were Facebook friends, they could then access information about each other’s likes and dislikes, comments submitted by other friends, and a variety of other personal details, any of which might make them jealous. For example, Justin immediately noticed that Clara had a new boyfriend. In addition, Clara started searching through Justin’s online profile for specific information about his romantic life. Jack, Clara’s boyfriend, noticed this new link between Clara and her ex-boyfriend and, as a result, more vigilantly monitored Clara’s profile page. Jack also started tagging Clara in more of his posts and publicly declaring his love for her



nensurial/iStock/Thinkstock

▲ Jealousy can be expressed and experienced online. Information posted online can be easily misinterpreted because there is a lack of context and a high amount of ambiguity.

to reinforce his connection with Clara. Thus, even though they were not physically together or interacting in person, the online relationship between Clara and Justin sparked jealousy for both of them and for Jack.

In the above example, Clara, Justin, and Jack each expressed their jealousy by way of **online interpersonal surveillance**, which emphasizes the intentional use of communication technologies to learn more about another person's online and offline activities (Tokunaga, 2011). Internet users likely prefer online surveillance because it allows them to monitor someone else without violating their trust (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). The geographic distance from the other person afforded by this type of surveillance also reduces the chance of getting caught (Tokunaga, 2011). For example, Clara, Justin, and Jack do not specifically know that they are each checking up on one another online. Research has found that the more people engage in surveillance online and the more time they spend on Facebook, the more jealous they are and the less satisfied they are with their relationships (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Users who are younger (Tokunaga, 2011) and are in less committed relationships (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013) also are more likely to monitor their partners' online activities. As online interactions continue to expand and evolve, it will be important to determine ways other than surveillance that individuals use to express their jealousy online.

Deception

A third challenge that relationship partners regularly face is deception. We engage in **deception** when we intentionally encode messages that encourage information or beliefs that are contrary to the truth (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Manusov, 2011). Note the inclusion of *intention* in this definition. Only messages that we strategically or purposefully intend to not be truthful with someone else can be considered deceptive. We are not deceptive when we accidentally provide incorrect information or when we genuinely do not know information.

There are two main motivations or reasons to be deceptive (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). The first, **self-centered deception**, involves lies that are told to protect the liar, either to preserve privacy, save image or face, or simply for the liar's gain. In contrast, **other-centered deception** assists or benefits another person, which can include protecting someone's feelings or how the person feels about him- or herself or trying to keep someone from worrying or getting upset. For example, telling your spouse that you were studying rather than catching up on a television show that you enjoy is self-centered if it keeps your spouse from getting upset with you, but it is other-centered if your grades are fine and it prevents your spouse from worrying about how you are spending your free time.

Deception is an interesting example of dark side communication because it so clearly runs counter to many of the standards that we hold for our interpersonal relationships, including intimacy, trust, closeness, and security (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). But in a landmark research study by psychologists Bella DePaulo and Deborah Kashy (1998), it was found that we are less likely to lie to our close relationship partners than we are to acquaintances or strangers. They also found that their college student participants felt more distressed about lying to their family members than when lying to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. In addition, we are more likely to tell other-centered, rather than self-centered, deceptions to those we are close to. Engaging in other-centered deception in this way can be viewed as altruistic, because we do so to spare their feelings, to protect them from hurt, and to convey that we care about them (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Yet regardless of our intentions, we will see in the next section that some individuals often do lie to others, including those they are closest to.

Prevalence of Deception

Many believe that honesty is the best policy, but the reality is that individuals can be deceptive more often than we think. To that end, it is important to understand a few different factors and their relationships to deception prevalence. Consider the following questions:

- Who is being lied to?
- Does the liar have a general proclivity to lie?
- What is the liar's age?

We cannot make blanket statements or generalizations about how much people lie. Instead, we have to consider who is lying, and to whom. As we already discussed, to whom we lie is the first factor to consider. Specifically, we tend to be less likely to deceive those with whom we have closer relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). The second factor is whether we have the general proclivity to lie. Prolific liars, according to researchers (Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010), are individuals who engage in substantially more deception than the majority of the population. The participants in this study (Serota et al., 2010) reported that they told approximately one to two lies per day on average, a range that is also frequently quoted in other studies; but the study results indicate that this approximate range is actually a misleading figure. The prolific liars—who made up 5% of a representative sample of 1,000 American adults—told 50% of all the lies reported in the study (Serota et al., 2010). Of the remaining 95% of this sample, only 40% reported that they had told a lie in the previous 24 hours. This means that a small group of people is telling the bulk of lies on a given day, so averaging the number of lies across all individuals provides inaccurate information about how frequently we deceive others.

The final factor that can impact deception prevalence is age. High school students tell an average of four lies per day (Levine, Serota, Carey, & Messer, 2013). This average is higher than that of college students, who tell over two lies per day, which is also higher than adults, who tell fewer than two lies per day (Serota et al., 2010). Further, in contrast to DePaulo and Kashy's (1998) findings for college students, high school students actually told more lies to their friends and family than to strangers or acquaintances (Levine et al., 2013). Thus, it is possible that, with cognitive and emotional maturity, comes the disinclination to lie to others.

Types of Deception

How prevalent deception is when we are interacting with others also depends on what type of deception is taking place. According to Judee Burgoon and her colleagues (Burgoon, Buller, Ebesu, & Rockwell, 1994), there are three broad types of deception. The first is **falsifications**, which are the outright lies or falsehoods that we typically associate with being deceptive. Telling your friend that you already have plans and cannot hang out with him, when in actuality you have nothing scheduled and just do not want to spend time with him, is an example of a falsification. Falsification is the most frequent and the most deceptive type of lie, and it is also the most difficult to detect (Burgoon et al., 1994).

Concealment is the second type of deception, and it occurs when you omit or leave out information that is relevant to a person or to a particular situation. You conceal information when you do not tell someone the whole story. For example, if a teenager tells her parents she is going to spend the weekend at the beach, but doesn't tell them her boyfriend will also be there, she is concealing information from them that they would probably consider important. We are particularly inaccurate about determining if someone is concealing information from us when we are suspicious of the story they are telling us (Burgoon et al., 1994).

The final type of deception is **equivocation**, which includes messages that are ambiguous, unclear, and indirect. For example, if Sharon asks Bill, her romantic partner, if her outfit makes her look fat, and Bill responds by saying, “Your hair looks great!” instead of telling Sharon that it might be a good idea to change what she is wearing, Bill is equivocating. When liars use equivocation, they are most likely to have their lie detected. Equivocation is also more likely than the other types of deception to create suspicion in the truth-seeker, which then increases the likelihood that the lie will be accurately identified (Burgoon et al., 1994).

Thus, of the three types of deception, equivocation is closest to the truth, falsification is farthest away, and concealment is somewhere in between (see Table 9.2). These three types expand upon the more basic notions of deception and show that there are lies that are more or less deceptive. They also differ in how accurate individuals are in correctly identifying them as deception. The next section delves into more detail about how skilled (or not) we are at determining if someone is being deceptive with us.

Table 9.2: Three types of deception

Type	Description	Proximity to Truth
Equivocation	Messages present distorted or ambiguous information	Type of deception closest to truth
Concealment	Messages omit information or specific details	Type of deception between truth and lie
Falsification	Messages present outright lies or falsehoods	Type of deception farthest from truth

Deception Detection

As we noted in Chapter 4, human beings are not very skilled at detecting deception in others, with many research studies (Miller & Stiff, 1993) finding that we only have a 55% chance of being accurate in any given deception detection situation. Even police detectives, who are extensively trained in detecting deception in suspects during interrogations, were only 49% accurate in knowing when someone was lying in one study (Vrij, 1993); this mediocre accuracy rate was achieved even though they used nonverbal (vocal changes, avoiding eye contact, and changes in body movements), social (such as acting anxious or introverted), and physical characteristics (for example, gender and how the individual was dressed) in their judgments of whether or not the individual was lying. The accuracy rate, which is just less than 50%, was in sharp contrast to the detectives’ high levels of confidence in their accuracy judgments. In other words, these police detectives were very certain in their judgments of whether or not the person that they interviewed was lying, but they were only accurate in detecting deception less than half of the time.

There are a number of reasons why we have trouble identifying lies. First, we tend to focus on nonverbal communication, even though research has shown that less than 3% of successful deception detection situations involve only nonverbal messages (Park, Levine, McCornack, Morrison, & Ferrara, 2002). The idea that we focus on (and are thus distracted by) nonverbal communication rather than on other indicators of deception is the heart of the **distraction hypothesis**. In support of the distraction hypothesis, lies were most commonly detected in Hee Sun Park and colleagues’ (2002) study by way of a third party, meaning that someone else gave the individual information that made it clear that his or her partner was lying. Pulling a friend aside and telling her that you saw her boyfriend at a party, after he had told her that he had not attended, would be an example of third-party deception detection. Another successful way that Park and colleagues’

(2002) participants detected another's deception was via physical evidence. Examples of physical evidence are finding lipstick on a romantic partner's collar or searching their Internet browser history to look for evidence of cheating. Other sources of information and other types of messages appear to be more useful than nonverbal communication when we want to determine if someone is lying to us.

A second reason that we have difficulty detecting others' deception is that we have a **truth bias**, which means that we enter into interactions with others believing that they are going to be honest with us. We believe that being deceptive is a violation of implied rules of both relationships and conversations (Aune, Ching, & Levine, 1996). The presence of this truth bias is particularly relevant when we communicate with those we are closest to: We trust these individuals and part of that trust means that we can believe what they tell us. Even though we know, based on the statistics that we discussed previously, that people we communicate with can be deceptive, this truth bias persists. To some extent, the truth bias is necessary for interactions and relationships to be successful. If we had to question or doubt everything we were told, communication would devolve into chaos, and it would be impossible to build relationships with others. Thus, you should continue to believe that those you interact with are being mostly truthful, but keep in mind that it is likely that they are occasionally deceiving you (as you are likely doing to them as well!).

The **leakage hypothesis** is the third reason that we are not skilled at deception detection. According to this hypothesis, which was proposed by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (1969), we believe that being deceptive creates internal thoughts and emotions that unintentionally "leak" out and are subsequently observed by others. The leakage hypothesis thus supposes that liars are unable to control elements of their behavior and that looking for these uncontrollable behaviors can help us determine if they are lying. For example, many people believe that the face is the most difficult area to control when someone is lying, and they focus on the face when looking for unintentional behaviors, such as shifting eyes, when trying to determine if information is truth or lie. One problem with the leakage hypothesis is that people who are intentionally deceptive make an effort to control how they behave and the messages that they encode. Another problem with the leakage hypothesis is that leaked behaviors may not always indicate deception. For example, we could appear nervous because we are anxious about social situations. Or we could seem stiff and disinterested because we dislike the person we are talking to. As a result, assuming that deceptive behaviors will naturally and uncontrollably leak out of a liar is not a useful method for detecting deception.

So, how do we determine if someone is lying to us? Unfortunately, there is not a universal method for successfully detecting deception, but there are a few techniques that can help increase your odds:

- Use multiple methods.
- Ask strategic questions.
- Use past experiences and interactions as a gauge.
- Understand the types of and reasons for deception.

Park and colleagues (2002) found that individuals who used multiple methods to try to detect deception—for example, combining physical evidence with seeking information from third parties or directly, verbally confronting the deceiver—increased the likelihood of uncovering the truth. A second technique that can improve accuracy in detecting deception is to ask strategic, direct questions that interrogate the potential deceiver, such as "Are you telling me the truth?" In instances where these direct, focused questions were asked, deception detection accuracy rose

from 44% to almost 70% (Levine, Shaw, & Shulman, 2010). A third technique is to consider if the individual's behavior is different from or unlike his or her usual behaviors. Shifts away from a normal communication pattern can indicate deception, and we are able to pick up on such differences when we are familiar with them and know them well (e.g., Jensen & Burgoon, 2008). Finally, it is generally best to be aware of the types of and reasons for deception. It helps to have a better understanding of the pitfalls of deception detection because this can help you approach or respond to interactions if you think someone may be lying to you. (Take a look at *IPC in the Digital Age* for some tips on detecting deception online.)

IPC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Deception on Online Dating Websites

Online dating websites such as Match.com and eHarmony.com have grown in popularity over the course of the last decade. As of 2009, 22% of heterosexual romantic partners report meeting a partner online (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). However, online dating users must determine how honestly to portray themselves in their online dating profiles and how honestly other users are portrayed. Are users being deceptive about who they are to increase the likelihood that others will view their profiles and contact them? It's important to understand these acts of deception in online dating because they can create unrealistic expectations that can result in dashed hopes and disappointment when the two individuals meet offline (Sprecher, 2011).

A series of research studies attempted to explore the issue of deception in users' online dating profiles. For example, communication researchers Jeffrey Hancock and Catalina Toma (2009, 2010) have conducted two studies to evaluate the accuracy of profile photographs used by online daters. For each of these studies, researchers recruited users from a variety of online dating sites, examined their profile photos, and then used a group of independent raters to determine if profile images were accurate representations of the users. The goal of the first study was to identify the accuracy of the online dating profile photographs and determine how different these photos look from users' current appearances. In the first study (Hancock & Toma, 2009), online dating users were photographed at the study laboratory, and then researchers asked 49 independent raters to compare the lab photo with the profile photo. The independent raters scored the online photos as less accurate than the users themselves did. More specifically, one-third of these profile photos were rated as particularly inaccurate, and the raters' scores indicated that the female users' photos contained more discrepancies than male users' photos.

Toma and Hancock's second study (2010) focused on physical attractiveness. Independent raters assessed each online dating profile user for physical attractiveness. These ratings were then compared with details about how much the users had enhanced their online image. Toma and Hancock found that the more physically attractive a user was, the less they engaged in photographic self-enhancement, but, overall, females enhanced their photos more often than males. From their findings, Hancock and Toma (2009) concluded that deception frequently occurs in terms of how users photographically display themselves online, and this deception is intended to present a better image of users in their online dating profiles. However, when users were physically attractive (as determined by independent raters, not the users themselves), they were less likely to be deceptive about their appearance. Hancock and Toma (2009) also noted that perhaps females were more likely to be deceptive in their dating profiles photos because our culture emphasizes the appearance and attractiveness of women. Apply these findings to how you present yourself online and then consider the following questions.

(continued)

Critical Thinking Questions

1. If you have an online dating profile, how did you choose the images of yourself to post on your profile? Do you believe that those images accurately represent you, or do they enhance your appearance in any way?
2. How might the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of your profile photograph impact who chooses to contact you? How might the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of your photo impact their impression of you if they met you face-to-face?
3. Overall, consider not only how you want to appear on your online dating profile, but also how those who want to meet you might react and respond when they meet the “real” you.

Verbal and Online Abuse

One of the most harmful ways that we can communicate with those we are closest to is by engaging in verbal abuse. **Verbal abuse** occurs when individuals use words to directly threaten or be hostile toward another. Threatening to harm someone, being insulting, engaging in relentless, intense verbal conflicts, and coercing via verbal threats or force are all examples of verbal abuse. **Verbal aggression** is another specific example of verbal abuse that involves attacking a person’s self-concept rather than his or her position about a topic or issue (Infante, 1987). For example, when debating about politics with someone, you act in a verbally aggressive way if you say “You are clearly stupid!” rather than “Your position on that candidate is flawed.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) found that verbal abuse was the third most common adverse experience that a child could have, after a member of the household engaging in substance abuse and parents separating or divorcing. Statistics also indicate that 26% of teenage girls who were in romantic relationships were victims of repeated verbal abuse from their partners (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2005). Similarly, 17% of college students (22% females and 11% males) have been the victims of verbal abuse by a dating partner (Knowledge Networks, 2011). Consistently enduring verbal abuse from someone can be damaging to one’s health and well-being and is linked to increases in stress and depression across studies. Further, versus a control group, teenagers who were criminal offenders were more likely to have observed their parents verbally abuse each other and to have verbally abused their parents (Spillane-Grieco, 2000). We discuss two specific aspects of verbal abuse, social aggression and cyberbullying, in more detail below.

Social Aggression

Sometimes verbal abuse is more subtle. One example of this is **social aggression**, also called relational aggression. When a person is socially aggressive, she is attempting to harm another by manipulating their relationships, such as by spreading gossip or hurtful rumors, by ostracizing that person from social situations or outings (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008), by ignoring the person, or by threatening to terminate their relationship (Willer & Cupach, 2011). Social aggression can also be expressed nonverbally by rolling one’s eyes, turning away from the victim, making facial expressions that mock or show disdain, or using threatening body movements or expressions (Willer & Cupach, 2011). The 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, starring Lindsay Lohan and Rachel McAdams, depicts the four members of the popular clique of high school girls, called the Plastics, as consistently engaging in social aggression by bad-mouthing one another and going after one another’s boyfriends. The worst example of social aggression in the movie is when the head of the Plastics, Regina George, distributes the contents of a “burn book” to the entire school, allowing the other females in her class to know that mean things were being written about them and shown to others.



Lisa Quarfoth/Hemera/Thinkstock

▲ Research about social aggressions typically focuses on adolescents because social aggression is most prevalent during this stage of development.

Research examining social aggression typically focuses on adolescents, as this is the developmental period when social aggression is particularly prevalent. Indeed, one national survey found that 35% of 11- to 15-year-olds spread malicious gossip about others on a fairly regular basis, and 32% were targets of such gossip (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Teen girls who are 12 or older, in particular, use social aggression in order to protect their relationships and their standing in their peer groups as well as to be accepted by others (Underwood, 2003). Social aggression involving teenage girls can include attempts to damage the victim's relationship with a boy and frequently involves multiple perpetrators and witnesses (Willer & Cupach, 2008). According to one study, adolescent girls who engage in socially aggressive behaviors are also more likely to have been exposed to televised social aggression (Martins & Wilson, 2011), suggesting a link between media portrayals and interpersonal behaviors.

What are the impacts and correlates of social aggression? Generally, being a victim of social aggression increases the likelihood that you will be lonely, depressed, anxious, have decreased self-esteem and increased physical ailments, lower performance in school, and that you will have difficulty relating to

your peers. In addition, the more an adolescent is socially aggressive toward others, the lower his or her academic achievement and the more he or she feels alienated (Martins & Wilson, 2011). Being socially aggressive also means that you are more likely to be physically aggressive (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). Further, in one study of high school females, the victim felt more negative emotions such as distress, fear, and upset when a high school girl who was more popular than the victim committed a mean act and when multiple girls were involved in the mean act (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Experiencing jealousy about a friend also meant that adolescent same-sex friends were more likely to engage in social aggression (e.g., Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005).

Unfortunately, though there are clearly a number of short- and long-term negative consequences for victims of social aggression, there is often little recourse when it occurs. Social aggression is not typically formally prohibited at school or in the workplace, making it difficult to punish the perpetrator (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). In some instances, such as the spreading of gossip and rumors, you may not even know who the perpetrator was or from where the information originated (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). Furthermore, it can be difficult to identify because there is a fine line between social aggression and simply ending a friendship (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). As an adult, consider using the following techniques to help your family monitor for and prevent social aggression and bullying:

- Ask about how school is going, listen to the responses, and evaluate changes in mood.
- Teach listening skills and empathy, emphasizing the importance of learning to understand others' points of view.
- Monitor for signs of social aggression or bullying, either as the possible aggressor or victim.

- Encourage children to talk about the issue with a trusted friend, family member, or guidance counselor.
- Work with school personnel to help make the school a safe environment (GreatSchools Staff, n.d.).

Thankfully, as we grow older and become more mature, social aggression becomes less common, though it may never entirely disappear. Some researchers suggest that being socially aggressive can foster a positive identity and a greater sense of belonging, meaning that there may be limited benefits of social aggression (Willer & Cupach, 2011). As an adult, have you ever dealt with a situation where a friend or colleague tried to freeze you out of a social outing or block you from a group of friends or talked about you behind your back? If so, you have encountered social aggression as an adult.

Cyberbullying

The following identifies some teens who committed suicide in response to being bullied via mediated channels:

October 2006: 13-year-old Megan Meier of Dardenne Prairie, Kansas

January 2010: 15-year-old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Massachusetts

September 2010: 18-year-old Tyler Clementi of Ridgewood, New Jersey

September 2012: 15-year-old Audrie Pott of Saratoga, California

April 2013: 17-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons of Halifax, Nova Scotia

August 2013: 14-year-old Hannah Smith of Leicestershire, England

September 2013: 12-year-old Rebecca Ann Sedwick of Lakeland, Florida

In some cases, the victims were bullied over social networks. In one case, a photograph of a victim being sexually assaulted at a party was viewed and circulated via mobile phones and social media. In another, the victim's roommate broadcasted his plans to record a video of the victim's sexual interactions on Twitter. In yet another, despite her mother's attempts to delete her daughter's Facebook account and monitor her social media usage, the victim reportedly received online messages saying "Go kill yourself" and "Why are you still alive?" because the victim had talked to the perpetrator's boyfriend. Though these are extreme examples, many evolved from instances of conflict, jealousy, and deception.

Though suicide is one of the most extreme responses a victim can have to cyberbullying, it is a harsh reminder that the Internet and other new technologies such as mobile phones offer a vast arena for bullying and aggression. What is cyberbullying? According to Ozgur Erdur-Baker (2009), **cyberbullying** occurs when an individual intentionally engages in hurtful communication activity via technological or mediated devices or channels such as the Internet or mobile phones. There are many different forms of cyberbullying: insulting, gossiping, or spreading rumors about someone through a mediated channel such as a text message, an e-mail, or instant message; exclusion of an individual from an online group or interaction; sending or posting an inappropriate photo or video of someone to one's social network; violating someone's trust by sharing information online; and pretending to be someone else when interacting online or via mediated channels (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

Cyberbullying is viewed as a byproduct of individuals feeling anonymous, and thus uninhibited, in online and mediated environments. Michael Greene (2006) notes that cyberbullying differs from face-to-face bullying in three ways:

- Victims may not know who the perpetrator is.

- The power imbalance between victim and perpetrator is one of technological knowledge and literacy.
- Bullying can occur anywhere, and it is not restricted to a physical location such as at school.

As with social aggression, cyberbullying is primarily a behavior enacted by young people. For example, a national study by Teenage Research Unlimited in 2007 found that 19% of teens reported that their romantic partners used mobile phones or the Internet to spread rumors about them. General estimates of the percentage of teens who have been victims of cyberbullying are 10% (Wang et al., 2009) and 11% (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) but has since grown to 17% (Zweig, Dank, Lachman, & Yahner, 2013). Further, 88% of teens had witnessed cruel or mean messages online, and 20% felt that their peers were primarily unkind to one another in their online interactions (Lenhart et al., 2011). Eighteen percent of a sample of Belgian adolescents admitted that they had engaged in cyberbullying behaviors (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). This study also found that individuals who bully others online are more likely to be bullies offline as well.

The issue of cyber abuse, which a recent government report concluded was “substantial,” is being dealt with at the individual, relational, social, and even governmental level (Zweig et al., 2013, p. xi). At the individual level, Amanda Lenhart and her colleagues (2011) found that 84% of teens in their sample observed their peers responding to cyberbullying by defending the victim or telling the bully to stop. Relationally, 86% of teens in Lenhart and colleagues’ study (2011) reported that their parents had advised them about how to be safe and act responsibly online. There are also many educational programs and interventions designed to combat cyberbullying, and 70% of teenagers reported receiving information about online safety at school (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Finally, the growing numbers of teen suicides in response to cyberbullying has meant that as of July 2013, 18 states had enacted cyberbullying legislation, with an additional 5 states and the federal government having proposed laws that will combat cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). These measures are encouraging, and suggest that the public is taking cyberbullying and its effects seriously. (See the *Web Field Trip* feature for information on safely using the Internet.) Consider using the following techniques to help your family prevent cyberbullying:

- Keep home computers in a shared area of the house.
- Talk with your family about their online activities.
- Identify and teach smart Internet habits, such as personal information and password protection.
- Monitor Internet activities and establish user rules, using parental control tools when necessary.
- Encourage children to talk to a trusted friend, family member, or other adult if they or someone they know is being bullied (Robison, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

It is important to note that, unlike the other three relationship challenges that we have outlined in this chapter, there are very few positive relationship effects associated with verbal abuse, social aggression, or cyberbullying. Social aggression can contribute to a sense of belonging and cohesion (Willer & Cupach, 2011), but the victims of such behaviors can suffer in a variety of ways. These aggressive behaviors hurt others and can have long-lasting psychological and physiological effects. As such, any abusive, aggressive, or bullying behaviors should be avoided for the health of the individuals involved and the relationship that they share. Perhaps the only benefit

to experiencing these forms of abuse is that it is a clear signal that you should immediately end your relationship with the abuser.

WEB FIELD TRIP

Safer Internet Day

Safer Internet Day is an annual event that started in Europe in 2004. Organized by Insafe Network (<http://www.saferinternet.org/home>), this campaign now involves several countries outside of Europe. The overarching goal, to make the Internet a safer place, emphasizes the importance of teaching users, especially teens, to combat harmful online behaviors such as cyberbullying. Safer Internet Day US (<http://saferinternetday.us/>) recorded and posted three separate videos from the first official U.S. event in February 2014. Visit the homepage, scroll down to the hyperlinked text “Watch the video of it here,” and follow the link to the videos. Now take a moment to view the first 16 minutes of the industry panel video and consider the following questions.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Consider Glenn Kaleta’s comments about the environment of online gaming. According to Kaleta, why does this type of environment create a certain element of risk for users? How does the host organization establish boundaries in this setting to thwart negative behaviors or interactions among gamers?
2. Explain the role of trust and safety in each of these different social media platforms. Is this unique to online environments? How might a user’s sense of trust and safety in an online interaction differ from an in-person interaction?

9.3 Strategies for Communicating Competently During Challenging Times

Rather than trying to eliminate all challenges and negative experiences in our close relationships, a much more realistic goal is to learn how to better manage these dark times when they do occur. Part of this process is learning to strike the right balance between bright and dark sides. This idea can easily be extended to include the majority of relationship challenges that we have discussed in this chapter, and one way that we can competently balance the bright and the dark in our relationships is via communication. We thus offer some specific strategies for competently communicating during challenging relationship times in the sections that follow.

Express Your Thoughts and Feelings Constructively

In most interactions, competent communication starts with expressing your thoughts and feelings in a helpful or constructive way. It is best to avoid judgment and blame because such messages will not deepen understanding or communication and can actually cause conflict. The emotions associated with feelings such as anger, remorse, disgust, sadness, and fear are all directed toward someone or something. **Emotions**, which are our body’s physical reactions to certain stimuli, can be very beneficial in providing information about our **feelings**, which occur when we add thought and interpretation to our emotional reactions. For example, when you have negative feelings, you know that something is wrong. Understanding the connection between emotions and feelings will help you better navigate challenges in your relationships. Below are some ideas about when and how to express feelings in a constructive manner.

Emotions as Information about Feelings

When other people share their feelings with you, it means that they have experienced something in the environment that has generated a feeling for them. If you judge the other person by saying, “You are just being a pessimist,” or “You have no right to feel that way,” you only increase the distance between the two of you. Instead, simply consider the other person’s statement of feelings as information you can use to analyze the situation. Could something you said or did possibly be misinterpreted by the other person? Did something in the other person’s past create the potential for him or her to interpret the situation in this particular way? Knowing how emotions become thoughts and then feelings and then behaviors can allow you to analyze a challenging relationship situation to see how you can improve it.

Appropriate Time and Place

Once you identify your feelings, you should next figure out the appropriate time and place to express them. Sometimes this is immediately. Maybe you are at a wedding and the bride and groom have just exchanged their vows and kissed—expressing your feelings of joy right at the moment would be appropriate. However, just because you feel something does not mean that you must express it immediately, especially if the situation in which you experience the emotion is not the appropriate time for you to address it with the other person. For example, you might be angry at remarks your significant other made at a party, but to avoid making a scene you would probably want to wait until you were at home to discuss just how angry you were. When you put feelings on hold in a situation like this, try to take the earliest appropriate opportunity to discuss the issue with the other person and to air these feelings. Most importantly, do not let your feelings build up and fester over time.

“I” Statements

An important key to constructively handling your interactions with others is to take responsibility for your role in the interactions. Instead of accusing someone of causing your feeling by saying, “You make me angry,” it is more accurate and more responsible to say, “I feel angry.” You can mention what the other person is doing that is causing you to feel anger. However, it is important to simply describe the behavior and not judge it. For example, when talking to a significant other, you might say, “Because you are not looking at me when I am talking to you, I feel that you are not interested in what I have to say.” This **“I” statement** describes both how you feel and describes the other person’s behavior without attacking him or her. This approach is much more constructive than using a “you” message such as, “You are rude for not looking at me when I am speaking, and that’s why I am angry.” “You are rude” judges the behavior and then blames the other person for your feeling with the statement, “that’s why I am angry.”

Improve Your Conflict Management Skills

It is important to remember that conflict is natural and bound to occur in any relationship. Instead of always avoiding or aggressively entering into conflict, try to manage or resolve your differences as competently and constructively as possible. Use the following techniques to help develop this skill:

- Identify and encourage positive emotions.
- Understand and strengthen your interpersonal communication skills.
- Monitor and modify your behaviors.
- Recognize and acknowledge when a conflict might not be resolvable.

Because research has shown that positive emotions are important during conflict resolution, injecting some humor into a conflict situation, reminding the other person how much you care for him or her, gently teasing each other, or nonverbally showing affection to the other person, such as hugging him or her, are methods you can use to de-escalate conflict. Your knowledge of the other person and how he or she might react to such displays should govern whether you use any of these methods. Remembering the positive things about your relationship when you are in conflict can often allow you to work out differences and have a mutually satisfying resolution that preserves a happy relationship.

You can also often prevent conflict by using the other interpersonal communication skills discussed in this text and increasing your awareness of your own communication behaviors. Are you unconsciously creating potential conflict situations through your use of threatening language? Is your nonverbal behavior at times domineering or overbearing? Do you get overly emotional during conflict situations? Paying attention and modifying your behavior, checking your perceptions with other people, practicing effective listening skills, and using the skills of active-empathic listening that we discussed in Chapter 8—these can all be useful means of preventing or diminishing conflict. Also, resist the temptation to judge others when they do not communicate as competently as you would like, and try to be tolerant and accepting of the behavior of others when they explain things in more detail than you need, they talk too slowly, or they ramble.

Finally, recognize that you may not be able to resolve all conflicts with communication. Instead, you may have to strive to manage the conflict in a competent way. Conflict can lead to aggressive and violent behavior that can become dangerous and harmful to your safety and security. When conflict becomes destructive or physically, verbally, or emotionally abusive, removing yourself from the situation is likely the best—and safest—way to handle the issue.

(Occasionally) Embrace Your Communication “Dark Side”

You have learned from this chapter that occasionally engaging in a challenging or difficult interaction can have some benefits. Completely avoiding negative interactions can prevent you and your partner from learning more about each other and from discussing potentially important issues. Engaging in conflict can help you gain a greater understanding of your partner’s point of view and, in turn, can help your partner learn more about your perspective. Expressing jealousy in a constructive way can show your partner that you care about and treasure your relationship. Being deceptive about a minor issue can be a way to protect your partner and prevent unnecessary conflict. Even encountering a partner’s abuse or aggression can serve as a clear warning sign not to remain in the relationship. Though the majority of your interactions should be positive, seeing the bright side of the dark interactions with which you and your partner sometimes grapple can ultimately be informative and bring you closer together.



Cathy Yeulet/Hemera/Thinkstock

▲ Interpersonal communication skills can be used to help prevent conflict. Pay attention to the effects of your speech and behavior and recognize when they can be modified to prevent or diminish conflicts.

Summary and Resources

Relationship challenges are inevitable, and understanding what they are and how to competently face them is an important aspect of interpersonal communication. The “dark side” of interpersonal communication refers to specific relationship situations that are difficult, problematic, and upsetting. Understanding the dark side of communication is as important as studying positive interpersonal experiences in order to gain a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the role that communication plays in relationship functioning. The impact of negative messages is typically much greater than that of positive ones, but negative relationship experiences can have unexpected benefits, or offer new insights, for one or both relational partners. With this in mind, the relationship challenges of conflict, jealousy, verbal abuse and social aggression, and deception are discussed in more detail.

Conflict can be defined as an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in accomplishing their goals. Conflict can permanently damage a relationship. There are five styles we can use when in conflict: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. There is also a difference between conflict management—which means that the issue is unresolved and likely to emerge again—and resolution, where the outcome is satisfying to both parties and is finished.

Jealousy occurs when an individual cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally or communicatively responds to perceptions of a rival to a close relationship. Jealousy can be experienced as a cluster or blend of different emotions and as thoughts or cognitions about the jealousy situation. We can express jealousy directly to our partner or in ways that our partner does not observe, and how we express jealousy is related to our relationship satisfaction. We can also experience and express jealousy in online settings, where the most prevalent method of expressing jealousy is by engaging in surveillance.

We are deceptive to relational partners when we create messages that we intend to be contrary to what we know to be the truth. This deception can be for self-centered or other-centered reasons; we are more likely to engage in other-centered deception with those we are close to. Deception can be prevalent, particularly when we include in our sample pool prolific liars who lie much more frequently than the rest of the general population. The younger a person is, the more frequently he or she deceives others. The type of deception should also be taken into account: falsifications, concealments, and equivocations. Detecting deception is much more difficult than we believe, with typically only a 55% accuracy rate. The distraction hypothesis, truth bias, and leakage hypothesis all offer possible reasons why we have difficulty accurately determining if someone is lying to us.

Verbal abuse occurs when we use language to threaten or be aggressive to a partner, and it is a common adverse experience among children and romantic partners. Social aggression is a form of verbal abuse that harms or manipulates someone by damaging their relationships. It is particularly likely between teenage girls and can have a number of negative psychological and health consequences. Social aggression is also difficult to identify or punish. Cyberbullying, which is different from traditional bullying, is another form of verbal abuse that involves hurtful communication over mediated channels. Attempts are being made to deal with cyberbullying at the individual, social, and governmental level, in an effort to reduce the prevalence of this new relationship challenge.

Key Terms

accommodation A style of handling conflict in which one has low concern for the self but high concern for the other person.

avoidance A style of handling conflict in which one has low concern for the self and low concern for the other party.

cognitive jealousy One of the two parts of the experience of jealousy; concerned with the thoughts experienced during the jealousy situation.

collaboration A style of handling conflict in which one has high concern for the self and high concern for the other party.

competition A style of handling in which one has high concern for the self and low concern for the other party.

compromise A style of handling conflict in which one is moderately concerned both for the self and the other person.

concealment A type of deception that includes omitting information that is relevant to a particular person or to a particular situation.

conflict An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their aims.

conflict resolution An outcome in which the parties have decided to end the conflict, they are both satisfied with the result, and they do not have interactions concerning the conflict again.

conflict styles Patterned behavioral responses that individuals use across different conflicts and with different people.

contempt One of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, involving attacking a partner's sense of self in order to feel superior.

criticizing One of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, involving attacking a partner's personality or character, rather than a specific behavior.

cyberbullying An activity that occurs when an individual intentionally engages in hurtful communication via technological or mediated devices or channels.

dark side of interpersonal communication Interactions that are challenging, difficult, distressing, and problematic in nature.

deception Encoded messages in which we intend to foster information or beliefs that are contrary to what we know is actually true.

defensiveness One of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, involving one depicting or seeing the self as a victim.

distraction hypothesis The idea that we focus on, and are thus distracted by, nonverbal communication rather than on other indicators of deception.

emotional jealousy One of the two parts of the jealousy experience; a blend of feelings that are related to jealousy.

emotions The body's physical reaction to certain stimuli.

envy The desire to possess something that one does not already own.

equivocation A type of deception that includes distorted or ambiguous information.

falsifications Types of deception that include outright lies or falsehoods.

feelings States that occur when we add thought and interpretation to our emotional reactions.

general jealousy behaviors Actions that do not directly involve interacting with one's partner.

interactive jealousy messages Attempts to avoid or engage in communication with one's partner about one's jealousy.

"I" statement A statement that describes both how one feels and describes the other person's behavior without attacking or blaming.

jealousy Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses associated with an individual's need to protect a relationship that is threatened by a third party, often referred to as a rival.

jealousy experience An individual's emotional and cognitive responses to jealousy.

jealousy expression Action or communication that results from the experience of jealousy.

leakage hypothesis The belief that being deceptive creates internal thoughts and emotions that unintentionally "leak" out and are subsequently observed by others.

online interpersonal surveillance The intentional use of communication technologies to learn more about another person's online and offline activities.

other-centered deception Lies that are told to protect or benefit another person.

self-centered deception Lies that are told to protect or benefit the liar.

serial argument A disagreement or conflict about a particular topic or issue that recurs over time and without resolution.

social aggression An attempt to harm another by manipulating the person's relationships, such as by spreading gossip or hurtful rumors or by ostracism; also called relational aggression.

stonewalling One of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, involving withdrawing as a method of avoiding conflict.

truth bias The belief that if we enter into interactions with others, they will be honest with us in those interactions.

verbal abuse An individual's use of words to directly threaten or be aggressive toward another.

verbal aggression A specific example of verbal abuse that involves attacking a person's self-concept rather than his or her position about a topic or issue.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Based on what you've learned in this chapter, why do you think that difficult, destructive communication has more influence on a relationship and on individuals than positive messages? How can these experiences strengthen a relationship?
2. This chapter reviews five conflict styles. Based on that information, describe your own conflict style. How do you think it influences your conflicts with others? How can conflict styles influence whether a conflict is managed versus resolved?
3. In what different relationships and contexts have you experienced and expressed jealousy? How did you express your jealousy and what do you think were the outcomes associated with those messages?
4. How do you detect deception in your close relationships? Which detection techniques are more or less successful for you and why?
5. Based on what you have read thus far in this text, what would you recommend to someone who was experiencing verbal abuse, social aggression, or cyberbullying?

