



## *How effective is your communication with your ex?*

Thanks for stopping by this questionnaire. As a family mediator I'm pleased you're interested in how you and your ex communicate. Not for their sake but for yours. Endless arguments, miscommunications and stonewalling are draining. They take up your precious energy, shoot up your stress levels and use up your valuable time. Time that you could better direct towards your children, or looking after yourself. If they spill over into legal disputes then they potentially cost you a lot of money too.

I'm passionate about helping separated parents to be able to communicate effectively because it means you're able to resolve any issues that crop up. That saves you a whole host of your important resources. It also means your children are less likely to be caught up in parental conflict. This significantly minimises the potential long term negative effects for them.

Communicating effectively doesn't need to mean you're particularly friendly. You don't need to be meeting for coffee, or holidaying with new partners. It just means when you need to, you can have a clear and productive discussion about your children without it becoming a huge row, or communication breaking down.

### **The 4 Cs of Effective Communication**

I've been working with those going through a separation for over 21 years. I've seen a lot of different situations but I've also seen what they have in common. Each separation is unique because the people and the relationship is unique but there are common threads that crop up in separation. I'm someone who notices things and who thinks about them a lot and I've spent a long time watching and supporting separating couples. This was initially as a lawyer but since 2012 I've been a family mediator and I have as a family mediator only since 2013 when I set up LKW Family Mediation.

I observed that there are some essential parts of communication and that they form what I like to think of as the four legs of a chair (I know you can get chairs with three legs but stay with me here). Each leg needs to be strong and the same length in order for you to feel comfortable and relaxed on the chair. If one or two legs are weak, or they aren't the same length then you're not going to get the same level of relaxation or comfort.



The same is true of effective communication. Sure you might be able to have a conversation but it's going to feel a whole lot easier if you have your four pillars in place. Those four essential pillars of effective communication are:

- ✚ Calm
- ✚ Constructive
- ✚ Conscious
- ✚ Compassionate

I call them the 4Cs for short. Let me tell you briefly about each one.

### Calm

It is challenging to stay calm when you feel emotional or triggered. You might be feeling upset and hurt and be fighting the urge to run away, or you might be feeling angry and annoyed and wanting to give it to the other person with both barrels. Neither is conducive to productive discussions. If you can gain an awareness of how calm you feel at any given moment, then you'll also know when you're starting to feel less calm. Getting to know yourself better also means discovering what is your fastest route to calm. Whether that's taking some deep breaths or giving yourself a moment to reset. If you can know you have the skills and the knowledge to remain calm no matter what your ex says it will honestly change how your discussions pan out. It's also about the long term care you show yourself and how you do that.



## Constructive

The language we use has the power to pull us together or push us apart. Subtle changes to the language you use can really change how you and your ex talk to each other. Don't believe me? Consider how you feel if your ex says "my children" as opposed to how you feel when they say "our children". How do they react if you say one instead of the other? Think also about any question you've been asked recently that starts with why. Here are three examples:

*Why did you do that?*

*Why do you think that's best for our children?*

*Why will that be a better house for you?*

Questions phrased in this way lend themselves to the person on the receiving end feeling defensive, or that they have to justify their feelings, actions or viewpoint. Really think about how they make you feel. Now consider these three alternatives:

*I'd really like to understand how you felt when that happened?*

*I'm curious about what you're suggesting. Tell me more about how you think it works for our children.*

*I'm wondering about this house and what advantages there are for you, could you explain please?*

It might sound strange but it can help you to write yourself a script of different ways to ask inflammatory questions, or to ask about relevant issues.



## Conscious

All too often those going through a separation end up having important discussions by accident. There's an issue (it might be about your children, or money, or something else) and it's skirted around at first. Then feelings build up and they spill out. If you know there's an issue you are going to need to discuss, then ask yourself:

- ✚ **When** is it best to discuss this (suggestion: not during a 5 minute meeting where children are being dropped off, or after a very long day at work).
- ✚ **Where** is it best to have this discussion (suggestion: sometimes more neutral locations work better. Being in public in a coffee shop can also help to keep a lid on angry words).
- ✚ **How** do you want it to pan out? What are the key issues you want to discuss? What do you think your ex will want to feel heard on? What do you need to feel heard on? Is the ideal outcome to just have a discussion at this stage or do you need an outcome? How will you know if it's not panning out positively and what will you do? (suggestion you could take a break, or come back to the conversation at another time).

## Compassionate

I have enough experience with separating couples to know that compassion for an ex is often in short supply! So let me tell you that compassion can be as simple as recognising that they have a different point of view and that's valid, even if you don't agree with it. It could also be accepting that their shortness or rudeness is simply because they're grieving too and not because of how they feel about you. Sometimes seeing your ex as your child's other parent and looking at them that way can be helpful. Your children want both of their parents to be happy because they love you. If you can see that your ex being OK is a good thing for your children then that may help to find a little compassion.

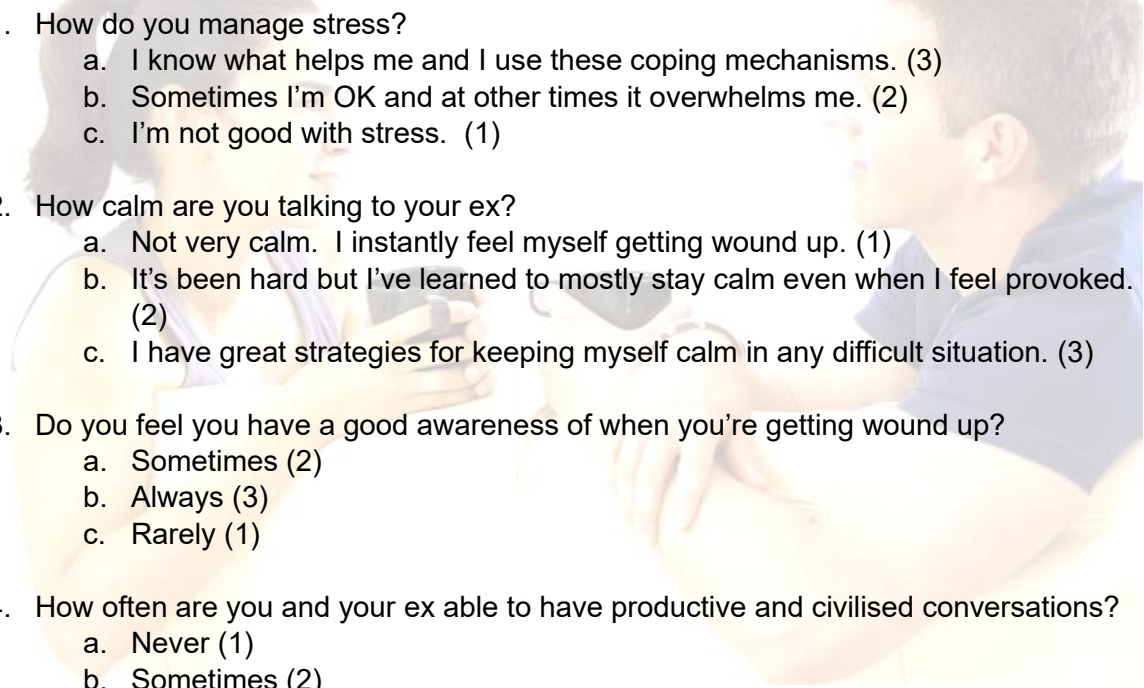
Please note that having compassion for someone in no way means not having any boundaries, or allowing them to be disrespectful to you.



So now you know about the four pillars and you have the analogy of a chair in your head, are you ready to take the quiz to find out which of your chair legs is strong and which might need a little strengthening?

## Quiz

Answer the questions below honestly and look at your score in each section. Then read what it tells you about this pillar. One of the reasons I talk about the four pillars of effective communication is that it helps you to understand what is good about your communication and what's not. As I've suggested above, think of it as the four legs of a chair. You want them all to be an even length or it's not going to be easy to sit on. You don't want one or more legs very short either. So having four effective pillars of communication means your discussions are likely to get the job done (and the chair will be more comfortable to rest on).

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1. How do you manage stress?
    - a. I know what helps me and I use these coping mechanisms. (3)
    - b. Sometimes I'm OK and at other times it overwhelms me. (2)
    - c. I'm not good with stress. (1)
  2. How calm are you talking to your ex?
    - a. Not very calm. I instantly feel myself getting wound up. (1)
    - b. It's been hard but I've learned to mostly stay calm even when I feel provoked. (2)
    - c. I have great strategies for keeping myself calm in any difficult situation. (3)
  3. Do you feel you have a good awareness of when you're getting wound up?
    - a. Sometimes (2)
    - b. Always (3)
    - c. Rarely (1)
  4. How often are you and your ex able to have productive and civilised conversations?
    - a. Never (1)
    - b. Sometimes (2)
    - c. Always (3)
  5. Do you know how to have collaborative discussions and to choose your language carefully?
    - a. I've never been taught this but I've learned a thing or two from talking to my ex. (2)
    - b. This is something I know a lot about and I use the strategies I have. (3)
    - c. I just tell them how it should be and then it's a big row. (1)
    - d. There is no collaborating with them. (1)
  6. Is there discussion when you talk to your ex or do you just each say what you want to say and get progressively louder as time goes on?
    - a. Yes often we are able to talk and discuss things. (3)
    - b. Sometimes we can talk but sometimes we can't. (2)

- c. No we just tend to shout our points of view at each other until someone ends it. (1)
  - d. No because we just don't have any discussions. (0)
7. Do you plan when and where you're going to have a discussion with your ex?
- a. Always (3)
  - b. Sometimes (2)
  - c. Occasionally (1)
  - d. Never (0)
8. Where do you generally have discussions with your ex?
- a. When dropping or picking up children (0)
  - b. Via what's app or email (1)
  - c. At a neutral venue (3)
  - d. On the phone (2)
9. When a conversation with an ex feels like you're both getting heated do you:
- a. Carry on and just have the argument. (1)
  - b. Make the decision to end the discussion and have it at another point. (2)
  - c. Shut down and think about how you can get away. (1)
10. Do you feel compassion for your ex's experience of your separation?
- a. Occasionally. (2)
  - b. Quite often. (3)
  - c. Never. (1)
11. How much do you understand what your ex's objectives or ideal outcomes are about the issues you have currently (even if you don't agree)?
- a. Quite a lot as we've talked about this. (3)
  - b. A little bit but not very much. (2)
  - c. Nothing as we're not able to talk. (1)
  - d. Not at all and I don't care. (1)
12. Do you care about whether your ex is happy in the future?
- a. Yes. They are my child's other parent. (3)
  - b. Sometimes. On good days. (2)
  - c. No Never. (1)

## Scores

Firstly, there's no judgement about the scores on this. It's not that you've got something wrong or right. This is purely to give you information about how to improve your communication. Improving communication is about making simple tweaks to increase the effectiveness and productivity of your discussions. It's not about changing who you are, or compromising on having boundaries. The scores are split into each of the four pillars.

## Calm

### Questions 1-3

#### Scores:

3-4 – This leg of your chair is a bit short and that isn't comfortable to sit on. You have trouble keeping and staying calm. This is understandable given the huge emotional upheaval of a separation. Separation can trigger trauma and it can also re-trigger past trauma. This can mean you're living in your sympathetic nervous system, and potentially in a prolonged fight or flight response. It may be symptomatic of where you're at right now in the grief process, or if it's been going on for a while this may mean you might benefit from some therapy as a safe space to unpack what you're going through. Things can and will improve. It won't take as much as you think to make positive changes.

4-7 – this score gives you a positive foundation. I invite you to think about whether you feel your improvement would be best made in having a greater awareness of how calm you feel at any given moment. Or whether the greater challenge for you is exploring coping mechanisms that will help you to improve your sense of calm and to quickly increase how calm you feel. These might be more short term techniques like breath patterns or it may be improving or further developing the way you take care of yourself.

8-9 – this is hugely positive as not only are you largely able to stay calm around your ex but you have a good handle on what keeps your calm and a good awareness of how calm you are at any given moment. It really does benefit effective communication.

## Constructive

### Questions 4-6

#### Scores:

3-4 – We don't really get taught about constructive and unconstructive language so there's no judgement on not knowing this. It's really hard to learn a new skill in the midst of emotional upheaval. You may feel like you've used up your bandwidth right now. The good news is there are simple tips that can make a big difference. Even simple things like saying "our" children instead of "my" children can change how things pan out.

4-7 – You've clearly already acquired skills in this area which is fantastic. Sometimes we learn as necessity demands things of us. In addition to this you may have learned things through work or other places that are now coming in handy. Have you already been surprised how changing the language you use can change how a discussion pans out?

8-9 – This is great. You have a solid chair leg here! Using constructive language will really help how effective your discussions are. Summarising what you've understood your ex to have said can also be useful, as can acknowledging their emotions. It doesn't mean that

you're agreeing with them. It's just using skills to ensure they feel heard which helps influence how your discussions pan out. Two people who both feel heard have far more effective discussions. Ensuring your ex feels heard encourages them to ensure you feel heard.

## Conscious

### Questions 7-9

Scores:

1-3 – the good news here is that being more conscious or mindful of your intentions about your discussion with an ex doesn't require any special skills beyond a little thought so this is a really quick place to make improvements. Remember that you can choose when discussions happen and you can suggest that discussions happen at a further point, possibly in a different place rather than having them when an ex initiates them.

4-5 – you clearly do give some thought to when and where your discussions happen. It might help to think about what works with how you discuss things and what doesn't work so you can think about where the improvements might lie. Maybe it's scheduling time to talk about things rather than allowing discussions to crop up as you go. Or perhaps it would be useful to find a more neutral location to have a talk together, or to change how you're having them. This will help to strengthen this leg of your chair.

6-8 – this is great. You clearly are mindful of how, when and where you have discussions and this really will help you to communicate effectively.

## Compassionate

### Questions 10-12

Scores:

3 – You may have sound reasons for not having compassion for your ex and that is totally OK. It's particularly hard where they behaved in a way that was hurtful or deceitful. If they have behaved in a way that you found abusive then you absolutely need to protect yourself. Sometimes just understanding they have another point of view and that's valid for them is sufficient. Don't compromise your own sense of peace or wellbeing trying to get into their head or trying to placate them. If things improve then you may find with time you have a greater sense of compassion but prioritising your own wellbeing and mental health in the aftermath of a separation is absolutely acceptable. You can strengthen this leg of your chair over time and in a way that feels right for you.

4-6 – it sounds as though you do have an appreciation of your ex's views and feelings even if compassion might feel a stretch too far sometimes. This will help your communication. It doesn't mean you have to be best buddies, or even friendly. Effective communication is about being able to talk about things and agree a way forward. It doesn't mean you need to be on chatty terms.



7-9 – You do have compassion for your ex (even if it's not 100% of the time) and this will benefit how able you are to have discussions together. Appreciating and understanding each other's points of view does aid useful communication – even if you don't always agree with each other's views, objectives or ways forward.

**Need more help with making your communication more effective?**

**Don't worry you're covered.**

[On the LKW Family Mediation website you will find a range of free resources you can download to give you tips on how to improve your communication.](#)

[You'll also find a blog with over 200 separation related articles so you're bound to find something that speaks to your situation.](#)

[LKW Family Mediation also has an online shop where you can download resources to help you make arrangements for your separation yourself. This gives you the most cost effective way forward.](#)

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Or get in touch with us via 01306 320520 or via [admin@lkwfamilymediation.co.uk](mailto:admin@lkwfamilymediation.co.uk). We can offer family mediation meetings in Dorking, Farnham and online.